

# Finding a distinctively Christian education for today: a reflective view from the classroom

This is a lecture by ACT member, Tim Pearson, who teaches at Birkdale, a Christian independent school in Sheffield, England. Here, Tim works towards a theology of education based on the Christian concept of love. He begins by explaining the Christian world-view of love, the starting point for our thinking about education. He then describes how our educational response is to Generation Y, the most secularised generation yet. The right response, he believes, is 'world-view education' in which students are taught about the fundamental importance of belief commitments, granting them freedom from secularised thinking and thus greater autonomy. Following the insights of a postmodern theory of knowledge, Tim comments on the way education is inevitably 'value-laden'. He challenges us to think about cross-curricular Christian ethics as a response to this. Lastly, he points to a tension between theology and education. A biblical world-view expresses that human nature is ultimately flawed; we need God to be good and to be wise. A Christian education will need to present this idea but in a critical, educational context. At the same time, Christian teachers will hope to create the possibility for *metanoia* – a 'change of mind' – in their students.

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## Our start point for educational thinking: the world-view of love

Let's begin with some theology. God is love. *'This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins'* 1 John 4:10. I want to construct something of a theology of education which begins and ends with this Christian concept of love. A distinctively Christian education will be distinctively loving.

I have a picture permanently up on my classroom wall: the 'hunger cloth' from Haiti. The picture encapsulates the Christian world-view. The key question for my students is this: 'Why is Jesus being crucified on the tree of knowledge?' The answer is: 'Human nature, once lost and corrupted, is now restored'. The concept of the God of love is, of course, absolutely central. So we have the 'sea of sin' below the tree, full of free human beings, corrupt and sinful. Yet the sin is drawn up into the tree by its roots. Upon it is the sinless Saviour, dying to end that corruption of sin. At the top there is a picture of heaven. There, Adam and Eve are restored. There is a wedding banquet, top right, Matthew 22; swords are beaten into ploughshares, Micah 4, and lions eat straw instead of lambs, Isaiah 11! Creation is restored. Interestingly, on earth now, in the middle section of the picture, the forbidden fruit has changed. Instead, we see the nine fruits of the Spirit. Connect with the Saviour, and your moral change begins in this life, as the Spirit lives in you. CS Lewis calls the love that is God 'gift-love', *caritas*. It is something unnatural, initially beyond our understanding. It is love for the unlovable.

So, if this is our start point, what should our approach be in education? When it comes to pastoral care, I think we know how a loving Christian approach works. We are understanding. We are unconditionally accepting, and, of course, love means discipline, too. But what about the subtleties of teaching and learning? How would a distinctively loving Christian approach make sense in terms of the education we provide?

On the front line would be RE lessons. Here the theology and ethics of our world-view of love can be explored directly: a kind of dialogue between student and faith tradition, developing certain skills and attitudes, bringing opportunities for personal development. So my main focus will be

*How would a distinctively loving Christian approach make sense in terms of the education we provide?*

the secondary school classroom and some of the lessons we use at Birkdale to present the Christian world-view in an educational context. But there are also broader comments to make about teaching and learning across the curriculum which will, I hope, be relevant to you, whatever your subject and whatever the age of pupil you teach.

## Part I Understanding Generation Y

From the outset I would like this Christian education to be relevant to the culture of our students. So let's do some sociology before we consider our educational response. Let me introduce you to Generation Y, although many of you will know them well. First, came the post-war baby-boom generation. Then came Generation X – born early 60s to mid-70s – disaffected, soul-searching. Now we are teaching Generation Y – that's anyone born after 1980. My main source of information for understanding Generation Y is a collaboration between several Christian sociologists and theologians, a book called *Making Sense of Generation Y* (Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Cray, 2006, Church House Publishing). The authors admit to being quite shocked by what they found. What they expected was a group of young people with

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The 'hunger cloth' from Haiti which hangs on Tim's classroom wall.

## *The relational aspect to Generation Y can be a good resource in the classroom*

some sort of spiritual need – a 'God-shaped hole' as we might describe it – and ways of responding to this. They found that this was not the case. In fact, Generation Y are the most significantly secularised generation yet. In the sample of 15–25 year olds, the overwhelming feeling was that you do not need God, to be happy. They appeared to have no need for, and in their language they did not include reference to, a transcendent dimension to life. What they have replaced this with is a focus on immediate relationships: family ties and friendship groups. Despite the divorce rate, the unconditional acceptance of family plays a key role for Generation Y. Parenting has generally improved, according to the study. They are the mobile generation, for ever texting or going onto Facebook. For Generation Y, 'You are who you know'.

Now some of this is a very good thing. The relational aspect to Generation Y can be a good resource in the classroom. But is there a downside?

### **Life in the happy midi-narrative**

In terms of world-view, there is something childlike about Generation Y. The researchers described them as living in a 'happy midi-narrative'. A meta-narrative is, of course, a 'big story' for giving life meaning. Generation Y haven't got that far. The way they think about meaning begins and ends with their day to day existence and immediate relationships, and they are happy. Interestingly, if they are not happy it seems they find it difficult to admit it. That may be one of the reasons why we have an increase in eating disorders amongst young people and in teenage suicide. If the 'happy midi-narrative' is inaccessible for some reason, resources for coping with unhappiness – beyond immediate relationships – are not readily found in Generation Y culture.

It is true that Generation Y's immersion into popular culture, film and music surpasses that of all previous generations. However, according to the researchers, they use media creatively to latch onto an ideal of happy existence which they then direct back to everyday relationships; even when the media concerned involve images and ideas of supernatural worlds: demons, ghosts, etc. These do not prompt deep questions about reality. These ideas are just the metaphorical backdrop to the soap opera story played out in front of them.

## Formative not transformative

I wonder how far you recognise this picture. When I did some research myself, I found a significant percentage of those doing compulsory RE at Birkdale – just under 75% – who doubt that religion or faith can be a source of meaning and happiness. Here is a typical remark from one of my first year students: ‘You do not need God for happiness; you need family and people who love you’. Now I’m an RE teacher. I’m bound to have problems with people who are content with a ‘midi-narrative’! To use the jargon, their world-view can be formative, it can bring them meaning, but it cannot be transformative. It cannot change you, it cannot give you a view beyond the immediate, it cannot transform your circumstances. Of course, this is the opposite to Christian spirituality which continually reminds us of the other, the God of love, who saves us and transforms us.

So it seems to me that one of the significant by-products of life in the ‘happy midi-narrative’ is a reduction in freedom. If your world-view only demands that you consider the immediate, and you are trained not to ask questions about existence, about human nature, about what is of ultimate value, then you accept blindly the broad tenets of secular materialism presented to you, post-Christian Western culture.

## *They will undoubtedly be influenced by consumerism — life is good when you can base your identity on what you have*

So, for instance, our Generation Y students will probably have a very reductive understanding of human beings – that we are in essence intelligent animals, the result of a cosmic accident. And that science, at least according to Dawkins, proves it. They will undoubtedly be influenced by consumerism – life is good when you can base your identity on what you have. Generation Y were shown to be significantly influenced by advertising, often knowingly, but then seem powerless to stop adverts from influencing their choices. Perhaps the relative affluence of Generation Y is the point here. At the same time, there are huge issues of social justice in our world today. Over 26,500 children die every day from poverty-related conditions (source: [www.globalissues.org](http://www.globalissues.org)): one every three seconds. We’ve all heard the statistics. My point is, left where they are, living in the happy midi-narrative, Generation Y are not going to change the world.

## Part 2

## A Christian education for Generation Y

So what should our response be? Love! Go back to our world-view of Love, and we find that the start point is human freedom. The creation of free human beings as the *Imago Dei*, morally aware, this is where our meta-narrative begins. It is because we are made by a loving creator for relationship with a loving creator that freedom is so important. So, we have a theological imperative to maximise freedom in our Christian education. We also have an educational imperative to see students free from unthinking attitudes. The very idea of personal development, a key educational objective, involves helping students to understand themselves so that they can take responsibility for who they become. Therefore, our Christian and our educational purposes can combine on this point.

So, we need to shock Generation Y out of blind acceptance of secular materialism. By the tenets of our theology of love, it is simply dehumanising to leave them where they are. And if there is any hope that they will move from a simple formative world-view of immediate meaning to a transformative encounter with the living God, the God of love, they will need to open their eyes to what philosophers call that ‘level of ultimate concern’ where questions of meaning and truth are explored. And they will need time to consider the answers by which they themselves are living.

## Education and the postmodern understanding of knowledge

A philosophical diversion will, I hope, be useful here. Broadly speaking, education – along with the perceptions of the rest of the Western world – has moved from the modern to the postmodern. The best way to make sense of this is by looking at epistemology – the theory of knowledge. The modern way was to divide public knowledge – facts – from private, subjective values. The moderns believed that there were objective, absolute, unquestionable ways of building these publicly acknowledged facts. These came from science, from empirical testing and from the application of reason. Religious belief was typically relegated to the private world of individuals and their subjective truths – unverifiable and therefore seriously suspect. What happened next was that Western philosophers came to the revolutionary conclusion that, having thought about it, objective absolute knowledge free from bias and subjectivity

was impossible. So post modernity was born. And it makes perfect sense. Even a scientist working through a theory as objectively as possible, testing empirically, even she must assume that the universe will provide her with intelligible data. Then she must assume that her interpretation of the data is correct, she must begin with some basic assumptions or beliefs. In fact, knowledge requires belief – a foundation of presuppositions on which all knowledge is built.

This postmodern understanding of knowledge has changed the way we think about education. In everything we do, we can trace our decisions to a set of fundamental assumptions about the way the world works. And this is our world-view.

### World-view education

So what difference does a postmodern theory of knowledge make? In fact, this is the essential start point for helping Generation Y to think for themselves. If beliefs, whether consciously held or not, always underpin the way humans make sense of the world, but Generation Y are happy to accept a secular view of the world unquestioningly, as if it is fact, we need some ‘world-view education’ in order to give them control over their own beliefs.

So, from the start of our curriculum, identifying beliefs and responding to them is of central importance, usually through picking apart the motives of a biblical or a Christian character. For example, we look at the moment when Saul becomes Paul because his world-view is turned upside down; or the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he is taken away to be executed, ‘*Some will think this is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life...*’

However, in older students, this ‘world-view education’ becomes central. At the start of Y9, I use a simple idea from existentialism to get them

## *In fact, knowledge requires belief – a foundation of presuppositions on which all knowledge is built*

thinking. According to Sartre, there are two kinds of people:

- the ‘authentic’, who think for themselves and take responsibility for their lives;
- the ‘inauthentic’, Sartre’s ‘herd’, the unthinking masses who follow along with the crowd.

We use a clip from the first *Matrix* film to illustrate this. Morpheus is instructing Neo about the nature of the matrix. He describes the mass of ‘inauthentic’ people stuck in the dream-world. Neo is clearly being taught about existentialism! However, there is much more going on in this scene. Look at the artist’s impression of the scene from *The Matrix* next to Piero della Francesca’s *The Baptism of Christ*. The imagery is equivalent: this is Neo’s ‘baptism’. Morpheus is John the Baptist – note the ‘baptistry’ behind them! The pigeon, frozen in time above Neo’s head, is obviously Piero’s dove! The marked difference is the image of Agent Smith, pointing a gun at Neo. I ask my students to find me the equivalent imagery in Piero. The answer is the River Jordan, which in the painting does not look like a river at all but a path to Jerusalem and thus to crucifixion.

Now, we can use the idea of ‘authenticity’ to explore the Christian world-view from which Piero was working. The key question to the students is: ‘Do we need a loving God to intervene in human history to restore human nature to its authentic state?’ And suddenly we are at the next level of



Artist's impression of scene from *The Matrix*



Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ*

discussion. It's not just, 'Do you make authentic decisions when you are out shopping?' It's, 'Are you an authentic believer? Are you in control of the beliefs that make you who you are?' So, a key component of our distinctively Christian education will be this kind of 'world-view education', challenging students to take responsibility for their beliefs.

## Challenging some preconceptions

From this start point, we can deliberately set the content of RE lessons to challenge some of Generation Y's secular preconceptions. At several points in our curriculum we look at modern miracle stories in order to see the limits of secular psychological explanations for the supernatural, showing how psychology can become a belief system itself. We focus on questions of the origins of life. We identify the world-view behind Richard Dawkins' claim that evolution disproves God. A key argument in *The God Delusion* is this: if evolution tells us that life starts off simple and becomes increasingly complex, then you would need vast amounts of time to evolve a being as complex as God. Therefore, says Dawkins, you cannot say that such a being begins the process in the first place. In my opinion this is only slightly more sophisticated than the perennial first years' question: 'If God made the world, who made God?'

We also look at the problem of suffering, which is always a real problem for rich Westerners. The key idea here is that Jesus is present with Christians in their suffering. Guido Rocha's sculpture of the crucifixion is one of the most awesome expressions of this. Rocha was imprisoned and tortured in Chile for making a stand against human rights' abuses. His sculpture of Jesus is a picture of himself being tortured. So we present the idea that love can transform suffering.

## The challenge of cross-curricular Christian ethics

RE lessons are the natural place for this kind of 'world-view education'. But, there is a broader educational point to make here. If a postmodern theory of knowledge is right, and we all make sense of the world through a world-view, a set of beliefs, then our curriculum subjects, all of them, are contained within a set of belief assumptions. So, walk into a classroom and everything matters. What you say, which textbook you use, how the curriculum is put together, how you punish, how you reward, whom you reward – all flow from a set of unwritten presuppositions. Education is a fundamentally value-laden exercise. Whenever

human beings interact, moral considerations are part of the equation. Ethics is everywhere.

If what we are doing is Christian education, I can see a challenge here. Why not, instead of some vague secular world-view underlying lessons, make an active step to reclaim the ethical context in which materials are used? Back in 1994, The Stapleford Centre began the Charis Project with just such an aim in mind. Instead of a maths textbook which teaches percentages with examples from the housing market, it makes the examples deliberately ethical, talking about charitable giving. They have produced textbooks on modern languages and science using the same kind of method. David Smith, one of the original Charis team, is still very much in the forefront of this kind of thinking. See [pedagogy.net](http://pedagogy.net). Now, this idea is not completely alien to us. We already audit our curriculum for citizenship and PSE – essentially cross-curricular morality. Teaching moral responsibility has always been a part of British education. So why not cross-curricular Christian morality, where the ethic of love is more obvious?

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Of course, our subjects in secondary school are now so compartmentalised that the idea seems virtually inconceivable. However, there is nothing stopping the Christian teacher from representing the Christian ethic in a classroom. In fact, cross-curricular Christian ethics is a lot easier at primary level. If a Year 6 history project on the Romans can be the context for a science lesson on Roman bridges, why not also make it a lesson in Christian ethics, looking at the dehumanising effect of Roman gladiatorial contests?

The real challenge is in the secondary school where subjects exist in their own right and the ethical context for education is arbitrary. If knowledge and skills are acquired as though life was lived in a moral vacuum, we cannot be certain that the end result will be morally responsible people. Our distinctively Christian education needs to claim this ethical dimension. It spells out the consequences of human decisions, it provides examples of Christian ethics in action across the subjects that we teach. If Generation Y are so philosophically and spiritually inept, they may need more than RE lessons to help them choose their values freely and adequately.

## A tension between theology and education: the dark side of human freedom

There is a problem, however. Ultimately, there is a tension between education and theology. Our Christian revelation does not tell us that free-thinking, morally educated students can be trusted to change and improve the world. Freedom has always had a dark side. And this is an idea we will probably need the RE department to deal with. Christian teachers cannot rely on some romantic notion of noble savages, inherently good, waiting for the right context to civilize them! There is an inherent corruption in human nature, the result of the burden of freedom. Now, we need God. We need to be saved! The theology of love is clear: our nature can be restored by God only. Jesus hangs on the tree of knowledge. Connecting with God, responding to love with love is at the root of really genuine moral and spiritual change. And even more troublesome is this: it is probably consistent with a biblical world-view to conclude that reason itself is corrupted. We need God to be wise. And if we really believe this, our Christian educational theory will need to take it into account.

For a start, in RE, we need to create time to explore human nature from a Christian perspective. One of the ideas we've worked on for Christian ethics in Y7 involves Plato's classic tale, *The Ring of Gyges*. Gyges is a poor farmer who discovers, on a corpse, a ring of invisibility. Of course, he is quickly corrupted. He gets rich. He kills the king, marries the queen and lives nastily ever after. And this is Plato's challenge: human beings are good only because they cannot get away with being bad. If we could do evil with impunity, we would. So, the ring of invisibility becomes the motif of the term. From then on we are trying to find a Christian moral hero who could put on a ring of invisibility and do good anyway! So, for example, we have St Francis arguing with his materialistic dad and John Barnardo humanising the poor on the streets of 19th century London.

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The theology of love is the key to understanding these famous Christian characters. Think back to Generation Y for a moment. According to the research, they knew about unconditional love within a family group. What we are presenting

to them are characters who are transformed by the love that is God, so that they can love the unlovable.

So, our distinctively Christian education contains an imperative to remind students to be virtuous ... but, to be consistent with our revelation, we need to demonstrate that extraordinary virtue requires a relationship with God. One of the most profound stories we use is that of Corrie Ten Boom who was sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp for hiding Jews. Famously, after the war, touring churches, preaching a message of forgiveness, she meets one of the SS guards from Ravensbruck.

## Our distinctively Christian education contains an imperative to remind students to be virtuous

These are her own words:

*'He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein." He said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people of Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I prayed, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.'*

## The hope of Christian teachers: metanoia

So, when all's told, there will be an inevitable tension between the limited purposes of education – to illuminate understanding and promote free personal development – and the ultimate purpose of the Christian message: to illuminate God to human beings who, in fact, need God in order to experience genuine freedom.

In this final section I want to suggest that even these two purposes can be reconciled. First, the rules of our world-view education are clear. Because we are exploring beliefs, not absolutes,

there cannot be coercion of any kind. There must be a critical distance allowing students to freely consider the claims being made. Our theology of love begins with this same concern for freedom.

Secondly, however, what is presented to students is a claim to truth, unverifiable in this world, but a claim to truth. As a part of the educational exercise, they are invited to see the world as a Christian sees it. I guess, the better the lessons the clearer that view will be! So, our distinctively Christian, distinctively loving education contains a hope that transcends mere education. A hope I would describe as the possibility that students will see differently after these lessons.

*Metanoia* is a lovely theological word, usually translated 'repentance'. More literally, it means 'a change of mind' associated with the process of conversion. Theologians point out that *metanoia* is only partly a negative dwelling on past sins. The other side to the concept is a very positive realisation of God's grace and love that suddenly, personally makes sense. And so this is the ultimate hope within our distinctively Christian education, that in providing a chance to see differently we present students with the resources – if they so choose – for a 'change of mind', *metanoia*. Thus, the education we provide can become a part of a spiritual process in individuals which God alone perceives.

To return to our earlier categories, we offer Generation Y the resources to move from the merely 'formational' happy midi-narrative of everyday meaning to a transformational spirituality with the potential to change themselves and their circumstances. And at the centre of this will be the God of love. It is this God of love who our distinctively Christian education bears witness to. In RE we must demonstrate what this love means – unnatural, dynamic, transforming. Students will be given their own space to respond, critically or otherwise, to the stories we tell. But the story needs telling. The grand meta-narrative of love needs telling. As Christians, we understand something of this strange, unnatural love, and that makes us just as much a classroom resource as a Guido Rocha or a Corrie Ten Boom, as we declare our own experience of the God of love.

■ Tim Pearson

*Thus the education we provide can become a part of a spiritual process in individuals which God alone perceives*

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