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Book Reviews

Gert J. J. Biesta & Denise Egéa-Kuehne (eds)

Derrida & Education

Reviewer: Clarence W Joldersma (p.93)

Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Christoph Th. Scheilke & Peter Schreiner (eds)

Towards Religious Competence: Diversity as a challenge for education in Europe 2001

Reviewer: Jeff Astley (p.95)

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Editorial: God's Involvement in Education

RICHARD MOUW'S RECENT book discussing the nature of God's involvement in human culture at large (*He shines in all that's fair: Culture and Common Grace*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) finds its starting point in what may at first seem a rather parochial backwater. It is not long, however, before Mouw's discussion of debates among Dutch-American Calvinists in the 1920's concerning the doctrine of common grace opens out into issues that affect any Christian engagement with the wider culture, including its educational practices and institutions.

On the one hand there is a view according to which all of God's energies are bent towards a single purpose, the plan of salvation for humankind, outside of which there is no experience of blessing. On this view, any apparent human goods that do not lead to salvation are worthless, and to describe them as blessings would be like describing as a blessing 'a nice sleigh-ride on a beautifully smooth and slippery road that ends in a deep precipice' (pp.18-19, citing Herman Hoeksema). In other words, if it is worse than futile to gain the whole world and lose one's soul, we should not be overly impressed with any supposed blessings we find in the world if they fall short of salvation.

Set against this view is the view which Mouw seeks to defend and to extend in fresh directions. On this view, God's purposes for the world are multiple, 'alongside of God's clear concern about the eternal destiny of individuals are his designs for the larger creation' (p.50). It is therefore legitimate to seek and acknowledge signs of his grace and blessing beyond the boundaries of the narrow road that leads to salvation. God's grace 'shines in all that's fair' and it does so for the benefit of God's creatures in general (p.64). After all, God is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35).

As Mouw emphasizes, what at first seems like an abstruse theological debate (the number and priority of God's basic purposes for the creation) has significant consequences for the ways in which Christians view and engage with the culture and society around them. If one simply substitutes 'education' for the broader terms 'society' and 'culture', the relevance of the discussion to Christian educators becomes evident. Consider debates among Christians concerning the degree of value or validity to be conferred upon education that is not based upon and accompanied by a full and explicit declaration of Christ's Lordship. Should Christian involvement in secular schooling be construed primarily in terms of evangelism, or professional neutrality, or service, or what? More specifically, consider recent debates concerning spiritual development, and the dichotomy commonly presented in those debates between a fully confessional spirituality and a spirituality-in-general that does not require particular commitments. If 'spirituality' outside of Christ does not lead to salvation, then what exactly is its value? And should Christians encourage it or resist it? On the other hand, if Christians can only affirm the spirituality of rebirth in Christ, what can they contribute to discussions of spiritual development in pluralized schools?

These connections with significant ongoing educational discussions suggest that attention to Mouw's thoughts on the part of Christian educators might prove worthwhile. One of his arguments in particular is, I think, worth exploring in relation to the Christian educator's calling. It is not unique – Mouw draws support from both John Calvin and Vatican II – but it repays a closer look. Mouw writes that Christians are answerable to an 'empathy mandate' (p.83), by which he means not only that they are called to display empathy towards the joys and sufferings of others, but also that we should be imitators of God in terms of God's feelings and attitudes towards the world. He illustrates his point with two examples, on the one hand an account of an act of extreme cruelty perpetrated against a Muslim woman and her baby during an episode of 'ethnic cleansing' in Eastern Europe, the other a description of a couple with a struggling marriage being brought to mutual forgiveness and reconciliation through marriage counseling. In neither case is there any clear connection to the repentance or salvation of any of the individuals involved; Mouw asks us, however, to consider whether our natural reactions of anger, horror and outrage (in the first instance) or of pleasure and approval (in the second) are 'sanctified instinct[s]' (p.42), or whether we would abandon them if we were to think them through theologically. In other words, is the eternal destiny of individuals the only thing colouring God's gaze, or is our sense of rightness or injustice, with the

accompanying emotions of sorrow or joy, a reflection of God's own reactions? If God rejoices in the good and is outraged by evil then, says Mouw, we should be imitators of God in our empathy.

This seems relevant to the discussions of spirituality in education mentioned above. If it is in God's eyes better to be humble than to be proud, better to show empathy towards others than to be self-absorbed, better be kind than to be cruel, then Christian educators have a basis for rejoicing in such things whenever they see them in their growing students, quite apart from the question of whether they have salvific value. Moreover, if such things can be affected in any way by the way teaching and learning are shaped, then Christian teachers have a basis for actively pursuing such things. Mouw laments the fact that traditional formulations of common grace have had a passive feel, depicting a 'transaction between God and unbelievers with virtually no attention to the active role of the Christian community in "delivering the goods," so to speak, of common grace' (p.80). He urges instead that

'We should not just stand back and watch for signs that God is restraining sin in the world, or hope that we might witness acts of civic righteousness popping up here and there in the lives of the unredeemed. We ought to look for ways God can use us to restrain the power of sin the larger human community, and to perform our own works of civic good.' (p.81)

Christian involvement in secular education must surely be a prime area for such activity. We should note, however, another implication of this line of thought. While it moves away from the idea that only that which is part of the salvation of the redeemed can be given any kind of Christian affirmation, it does not lead to the view that Christians should affirm whatever anyone else affirms, or, more particularly, to the affirmation of 'spirituality in general'. That would only follow if we imagined God's affections to be devoid of specific shape and content, such that any form of spirituality would occasion equal delight. If God's desires for his human creatures have a particular, determinate shape, if he delights in some ways of being and not others, then even when Christian educators seek the penultimate good of those in their charge, apart from the question of salvation, that good will for them have a particular shape. And this is perhaps the central challenge for Christians working in education: to hold together the tasks of contending for the Gospel in its fullness, rejoicing in the good wherever they find it (or wherever they might have a hand in encouraging it), and allowing the former to shape their view of the latter so that even when they are engaged in wider cultural efforts that may not contribute directly to personal salvation, their engagement will be Christian in shape.

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In his article in this issue of *JECB*, John Sullivan argues that 'Christian education requires two major movements, if it is to develop healthily, if it is to remain Christian and if it is to be really educational'. These movements are formation and what he calls 'work at the frontiers'. He goes on to explore the dialectical relationship between them and to call us to give due attention to both movements in our discipleship as Christian educators.

David Anderson focuses our attention on a particular kind of work at the frontiers, that of special education. He presents it as a ministry of reconciliation designed to promote community and wholeness which should find a central place in any educational endeavours on the part of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Mark Pike turns our attention to a different kind of frontier, that of reader response theory. He argues that it offers valuable insights that can be applied to both the reading of the Bible and also to how it can be taught in a range of contexts, in Christian and state schools, as well as in churches.

Chris Sunderland takes us into the arena of education for citizenship and presents an approach that includes faith as an integral dimension and the concepts of story, trust, power and success as ways into the exploration of the most fundamental human questions concerning knowledge, purpose and social systems.

Fedor Kozyrev brings us the results of a survey of moral and religious beliefs among adolescents in Saint Petersburg. This provides evidence that decades of atheistic education have not eradicated religious faith and that religious teaching has a strong influence on ethical value systems.

John Shortt & David I. Smith