

**'The God of my mind is a mere
construct of the mind; I know no
God but the God of my heart.'**

26 The ‘Gretchen Question’

The source of the ‘Gretchen question’ — a question or discussion about someone’s religious convictions — can be found in Goethe’s play. Gretchen asks Faust, ‘And what about your religion?’ Faust’s answer is evasive and we are tempted to use the same tactic. Religion in school? In a state school? Is there any question of that nowadays?

Fifty years ago there was no question about it. Prayers were said at the beginning and end of school, in Catholic areas there was a cross on the wall and religious instruction was — along with that for the various confessions — part of the official syllabus. And if anyone offended against Christian morality, it was quite natural for a teacher to quote the Ten Commandments.

Naturally there are schools where that is still the case, but in general, conditions are markedly different, for in the meantime a fundamental social change has taken place. The ties that the population previously had as a matter of course with one church or another have weakened significantly. Traditional Christian ideas of sin and its consequences are no longer the basis of the moral attitudes of the majority. Most religious observances within the family and in public have been discontinued. For the public in general the distinctions between the various churches have blurred and the barriers between the churches have fallen correspondingly. The authority of ecclesiastical institutions has sunk to a minimum. A large proportion of those who describe themselves as religious have distanced themselves from traditional tenets and include elements of other churches, religions

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or philosophies in their beliefs. Foreign religions have taken up residence in the formerly Christian West. Publicly acknowledged lack of religious belief is socially acceptable. Religion is considered a private matter and only appears peripherally in public discussion of politics, science or the arts.

In this environment it is hardly possible to reach a consensus on any function religion might have in state education. What first comes to mind is tolerance: anyone who wants to have a religion should practice it in private, anywhere they like, apart from in school. Schools should be a religion-free zone.

But if we think that, we are deceiving ourselves. There are religious cultures for which tolerance is not a desirable quality. They insist on being allowed to live out their religious convictions in school as well. Teachers are directly confronted with this: girls want to wear religious symbols and not take part in gymnastics or swimming lessons or school camps; pupils in primary one refuse to write a 't' because it is a cross; parents protest when candles are lit at Christmas, carols sung and Christmas stories read, while others demand that in science the Biblical story of the creation should replace evolution or at least be taught as an alternative theory.

These developments leave schools in a no-win situation. The clash between intolerance and tolerance will lead either to conflict or to the victory of intolerance and the loser will be our teaching, for education in the tradition of enlightened humanism is not possible either in an atmosphere of intolerance or on the basis of a struggle for power. Teachers must not be left to deal with this situation alone, it is politicians who must meet the challenge.

It was easier for Pestalozzi. He could at least assume a consensus of the majority of the population regarding Christianity or at least religion in general. For him there was no doubt about it: the education of the whole person, as he understood it, is fundamentally religious. *'I am convinced my aims will only flourish in religious soil'* he wrote in 1808 to Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg, the vicar-general of the diocese of Constance. And in his main work on educational method, *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt* (How Gertrude Teaches her Children, 1800) he calls the question of the relationship between his method

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of education and the development of reverence for God '*the keystone of my whole system*'. Correspondingly, he regards the most profound goal of the education of the heart as 'faith and love' and combines the two goals of moral education and reverence for God in the concept of 'moral-religious education'. For him, then, 'the faculties of the heart' are not, as is often assumed nowadays, the emotions as such, but our 'moral-religious powers'.

We must remember that Pestalozzi did not see 'God' primarily as a power ruling the world from above, but as an inner light at work within the human heart. He regarded God as '*the closest relationship of mankind*', that is, not as a supernatural being, but as a reality we can feel in our own hearts. His 'moral-religious education' was designed to enable young people, as they grew up, to hear and love '*God in their innermost being*'. He saw this form of the love of God as the surest basis for ethical behaviour. Thus he wrote in 1782, in a little essay on religion in his own periodical *Ein Schweizer Blatt*: *If you forget God, you forget yourself, for the love of God is your life, O mortal — it is the bond that ties the powers of your heart and your head, and if this sacred bond of your powers should break, it will mean they will fall apart and that will be the source of the sin that will kill you, O man! Therefore guard well the source of your life and the bond of your noblest powers and love God. Look around you, O mortal, and see what is the man who does not love God.*

And then he goes on to describe the consequences of godlessness: unhappiness, despair, self-destruction. '*The bonds of life are bonds of virtue and they tear apart when a man does not honour God.*'

Anyone who aims at 'education in the spirit of Pestalozzi' cannot afford to ignore these remarks that are central to his outlook. They must at least ask themselves: could it be the case that Pestalozzi's judgment is correct? Could it be that those people who were educated in that spiritual ethos and are willing to justify their lives before God might indeed in general behave in a more socially responsible manner than those who reject the idea of a divine inner voice without even considering it; could it be that they are more likely to reject violence, to show more respect for their fellow human beings, to be more persistent in the pursuit of peace, more ready to accept responsibility or to show a caring attitude to the world around?

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Should Pestalozzi be right, would it not be sensible, given the urgent social and moral problems of the present, to consider whether, and in what new forms, religious concepts could be included in the education system.

Against the background of the social change mentioned above and the legal situation of state schools, it is no longer possible to insist on the tenets of specific churches, or even specifically Christian ones. What is needed is what is common to all religions: the awareness of the existence of an all-embracing power and the willingness to justify our lives before it as the ultimate inner authority — which expresses itself in our conscience.

Only teachers who have a positive emotional relationship with their pupils can talk credibly about *conscience* and listening to one's own inner voice. Such a relationship is characterised by mutual respect or affection. On that basis it is possible to examine the question of what grounds there are for a person to do good and eschew evil. I have come across pupils who saw only one single reason not to steal the goods in the supermarket: they didn't want to be caught. I have also come across pupils of sixteen who, as far as they were aware, were hearing the word 'conscience' for the first time — and had no idea what it meant.

Conscience can only be developed in a *culture of quiet*. If, as a teacher, one cannot manage to get one's class to feel the beneficial effects of true quiet, talking about conscience will just degenerate into preaching morality. It will not reach the pupils' centre. Fortunate are the pupils who, together with their teacher, can be quiet, listen to what is inside themselves and express what they have heard without having to hold back. This intimacy is, in a way, the antithesis of the increasing hustle and bustle and depersonalisation in modern education.

At the centre of a culture of quiet is *meditation*. It is a place where religious and non-religious people can meet. It is free from any kind of dogmatism or ideology. Teaching that is founded on the spirit of Pestalozzi always offers opportunities for moments of meditative contemplation.

This culture of quiet and the habit of meditative moments is also in contrast to the increasingly brutal nature of society which expresses itself on the one hand in its simplistic language with trite superlatives and on the other in its coarse way of addressing others and, ultimately,

in psychological and physical violence. I really do not know of any other way of setting young men, who can do nothing but use their fists, on the road to showing understanding and consideration for others, than by gently introducing them to the possibility of quietening down, of listening to what is inside themselves.

Religion does have a legitimate place in school in a more limited way, namely as part of our cultural heritage. To be interested in religion and its expressions, one does not have to be any more religious than one has to be a Marxist to study Marxism. Anyone who refuses to concern themselves with religion at all is ignoring a central element of human life and therefore lacks a key to the understanding of important historical circumstances, of notable social phenomena and of major works of literature, art and music. Whether one regards the Bible as a divine revelation or not, knowledge of the Bible facilitates the understanding of countless cultural phenomena. Seen in this perspective, it is as reasonable to expect a Muslim to familiarise himself with the Bible as a Christian to read the Koran.

Similarly, it is part of a person's education not only to learn the biographies of people who were guided by ideologies, but also the lives of people who drew strength from their relation with God. I do not see why our pupils should learn something about Hitler, Lenin or Mao but hardly anything about Theresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, Abbé Pierre or Cardinal Galen who, in the most difficult times, sought for a way that could combine Christian action, patriotism and the struggle against Nazi ideology.

Young people look for *models*, a fact well known to the modern entertainment industry, which exploits that need to the full. Every teacher who acquaints his pupils with the biographies of people who obeyed the dictates of their conscience, were true to their ethical principles or lived out their religious faith in their lives, gives young people a yardstick against which to measure things. Perhaps they will discover potentialities within themselves which will make them strive for higher things than merely shining in the limelight.

Any teacher, even a non-religious one, can make full use of the suggestions I have made here. A teacher with religious convictions must observe restraint. Propaganda for his beliefs would be just as much an

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abuse of power as propaganda for a political ideology. As is well known, every standpoint has its opposite, and honesty demands that we present both as objectively as possible. So far, so good. But as long as a teacher attempts to satisfy that demand, there is one right one cannot refuse him, namely the right to *bear witness*. Here, too, he must show restraint, but there will be occasions when a teacher will tell his pupils why he does one thing and not another, and a teacher with religious convictions will leave his pupils in no doubt as to where he draws his strength from and to whom he feels he owes responsibility.