How should we talk about faith in education?

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Thank you for inviting me. What I share with you is the substance of a chapter on a forthcoming book – *For God's Sake: Re-Imagining Priesthood and Prayer in the Church of England*, which is edited by Sarah Coakley and Jessica Martin and coming out with SCM Canterbury Press. The book will be the third that the Littlemore Group has published – *Praying for England* and *Fear and Friendship* being the other two. The Littlemore Group aspires to offer the Church of England good theology from and for the parishes. In this latest volume, I was given the task of reflecting on Church schools and their contribution to the parish – and indeed, the nation.

My second child – now a young man of twenty five – is currently training as a teacher, and has recently landed a job at Twyford CofE High School in Ealing. He is at the beginning of what will be, hopefully, a long and fulfilling career, teaching young people not only enough to pass their exams, but what it means to be a mature adult, with the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical resources to cope in an increasingly complex world. Able to form long-term and trusting relationships; able to be good parents; employable and with a fulfilling work/life balance. Able to look beyond their own needs and give of themselves that others may benefit. My son will have, over the next forty years, a key role, directly and indirectly, as a formative influence on the lives of many young people as they grow towards adult personhood.

What lies ahead for him?

Education in Britain today is complex, with political and ideological tensions in play, with much invested in children as the future, as was ever the case since the concept of 'childhood' emerged. The formative processes of early years and school are fundamental to the development of the adult person.

In 2010 Frank Field MP produced a report, *The Foundation Years*, commissioned by David Cameron. He is also engaged in the latest cross-party work, led by Andrea Leadsom MP, that has produced *The 1001 Critical Days*. Field recognised

that poverty is not merely a material, but also an emotional, social, psychological and cultural phenomenon. Children who are emotionally impoverished, who are poorly attached to their parent, struggle to learn in school, to socialise. They are difficult to educate, and often end up in the criminal justice system, or with chronic health problems, or both. Field pinpointed two prime times for intervention: the early years of life, from the womb until 5 years, to enable children to be able to benefit from school. And at secondary school, so pupils learn to be good parents: socially, emotionally, culturally literate so they can form trusting relationships as adults.

He spoke of the 'rupturing of a good parenting tradition' over recent decades, and that it should be a priority to reverse this social trend, for the good of society. He was surprised to hear, from teenagers, that they agreed.

> Some time ago, I asked to meet a group of 15 year old pupils in one of Birkenhead's most challenged schools … I asked each of them to list for me which six outcomes they most wanted to gain for themselves from attending school. Their replies both shocked and delighted me. Without exception, all of these young citizens listed … the wish to be taught how to be good parents.

Field talked afterwards with the head teacher and learned that the majority of that group had rarely, if ever, known parents who put the needs of their children before their own.

So what should be the distinctive contribution that Church schools can make in Britain today? Church schools have their ideological detractors, but are widely recognised as offering a high standard of education to children and young people that is valued by parents, whether church goers or not. I will suggest here that, in a time of change, the Church of England should take the opportunity to become more distinctive in what its church schools offer, drawing on the resources of Christianity, mining the long traditions of reflection on how human personhood is developed and shaped. Behind my thinking is the assumption that education is a formative process that enables habits of the heart, mind, soul and strength to be established, that in turn enables the person to love God, and other people as themselves, so that it becomes second nature to be self-giving, to put the needs of others above one's own, with a commitment to make a better world. That the Great Commandment of Jesus Christ – to love God with

heart, mind, soul and strength, and one's neighbour as oneself – should frame that distinctive education.

It's important to be clear – and to make it clear to those who make a common misconception: church schools are not faith schools! 'Faith schools' serve a particular faith group, whether Muslim, or Jewish, or Pentecostal, and will, typically, have an admissions policy that draws children predominantly from that particular faith group. A 'church school', on the other hand, will have admissions policies that try to reflect both church allegiance and a commitment to the children within its catchment community regardless of their religious or denominational background. I know it becomes complex in practice, but in my experience, Church schools will reflect the surrounding community: some are mainly, or even totally, educating Asian-heritage children, for example.

To give a little history, the Church of England's engagement in education dates back to 1811, when the National Society was founded, and the Church of England first promoted 'the education of the poor in the principles of the established church'. By the time of the 1944 Education Act, a large proportion of the nation's schools were church owned and run. This act reformed the educational system after the Second World War, primarily to provide secondary education for all children.

During the 1980s and 1990s there was a plethora of Education Acts, and continuing debate about the role of religion in education, which continues at the present time. In an increasingly secular age, the question of the extent to which education should be 'religious' and what that means is never far away, and has become of particular interest as other faiths have claimed the right to have state-sponsored faith schools. The landscape is changing fundamentally in today's educational world as we see a revolution that takes us towards academies and free schools. My sense is that the Church of England needs to be proactive, aware of its strengths, and able to promote its distinctive contribution.

So what does make Church of England schools distinctive? The culture or ethos of the school is important. The head teacher and governors, usually with local clergy, will seek to embed particular values so that children of different faith backgrounds, and none, feel at home. Sometimes the Christian teaching and virtues will not be explicit, for fear of causing offence, but rather the Christian

roots of the school will be evident in a commitment to the needs of the whole child, with recognition of spiritual alongside the emotional, intellectual and physical needs. The local clergy and lay people usually will play a key role in leading assemblies, offering teaching and classroom assistance, as school governors.

Against such a backdrop, in a time of change, what more might the Church of England nationally contribute to the education of children at primary and secondary levels? How might that education, as a formative process of deep significance in a person's life, shape the adult? What is distinctive about what Christianity brings to this formative process that enhances what it means to be human person?

This begs an important question about the nature of the human person. A question that requires greater clarity, as different conceptions of personhood will emerge in a plural society. Such working ideologies tend to be invisible, taken for granted, and quickly stir defence. So I'm going to stick my head above the parapet and say that I tend to recognise three aspects to our dominant contemporary anthropology: excessive individualism, a tribal understanding of 'identity', and an instrumental or utilitarian mindset.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has described excessive individualism as the greatest contemporary evil. In educational terms, this can mean that a child will be placed at the centre of his or her education, as an individualistic atomised 'self', following her own pathway through, seeking self-actualisation as the goal.

Secondly, the category of 'identity' is often the dominant way of speaking of oneself. Identity – whether defined on cultural, or religious, or gender, or sexuality lines – is the first descriptor that a person will use. Such identity labels can foster a tribal sense of belonging rather than a commitment to humanity as a whole. Tribal belonging often leads to cycles of violence and revenge, caused by the tribal defence of honour and reputation.

Thirdly, it can be hard not to be caught up into an instrumental or utilitarian mindset which values things and relationships only in terms of how useful or purposeful they are.

In contrast, Christianity offers a different understanding of what it means to be human. St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, for example, where he described the Body of Christ as made of many members who all contribute, distinctly, to the whole, and – most importantly – who care for the least reputable. Paul's sense of the corporate offers a challenge today to a society that is increasingly atomised, instrumental and tribal. Challenging us to be self-giving, rather than self-promoting – which means we counter a me, me, me way of being, and the social atomism that results from selfishness. That we love our neighbours as ourselves, taking us into public service and, more personally, the responsibilities of love.

That we resist cycles of violence and revenge. Christianity teaches forgiveness – an increasingly forgotten virtue today. The world desperately needs people who know how to forgive.

And thirdly, Christianity teaches about doing and being for its own sake, rather than for utilitarian or instrumental purposes and ends. The worship of God is the prime example. An activity that has no obvious utility or instrumental advantage.

Western society today tends to be individualistic, tribal and instrumental. We need to ask ourselves, as a society, whether there are other, better ways of being human. I suggest here that Christianity offers wisdom to the question of what enhances human personhood. How do we rebuild a society where we can transcend individualised identity into a sense of belonging that is not tribal, but which can hold together, and pass on, a strong sense of virtue in this diverse nation that Britain has become?

An instrumental approach often applies to education itself. It is seen as a means to an end – a good career, self-fulfilment, getting on in life. To understand education not instrumentally, but as an end in itself, as worth doing for its own sake, is difficult. But it is important to hold onto this principle.

Education is an end in itself, for its own sake. In a church school perhaps one can go further and say education is for God's sake. It is to create human persons in particular ways. If it is for God's sake, then church schools can offer education that shapes the child, and therefore the adult, drawing on Christian traditions of

anthropological thought. As the child grows and develops through school, the rich resources of Christianity – in its narratives, in its worship, in the wisdom gained through centuries of thought and reflection on the Judaeo-Christian scriptures – can be more explicitly used to encourage maturity of heart, mind, soul and strength, and love of neighbour as self. To be individual, not individualistic. Not to belong to a tribe to bolster a fragile sense of identity, but to have character. To do things and treat people as ends, not as means to one's own ends.

To take the Great Commandment as foundational is to consider the growth of the child towards mature personhood emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and physically. It is also to take Jesus Christ's mandate to 'love your neighbour as yourself' into clear Christian terrain, away from the usual moral injunction of the Golden Rule, where all that is expected is that one should treat others as one would wish to be treated. By contrast, to love one's neighbour asks for commitment to the service of others. It means a life of continued challenge to self-centredness, or self-promotion, or self-interest. So that going the extra mile when required, in a self-sacrificial way, becomes second nature. It is crucial, of course, that someone embarked on such a life really does love themselves too. Good self-esteem and self-worth are vital if one is to love one's neighbour. Otherwise what is really happening is one's own needs for love dominate in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, to the detriment of self, and the others for whom one tries to care.

With that Great Commandment to help us to think about the child as he or she grows to mature human personhood, let us take each of those areas in turn.

With a husband who is a Paediatrician, often our pillow talk takes off in strange directions. He is professionally interested in attachment theory: how one helps parents bring up securely-attached babies and young children. Love matters: if a child receives the right attention from earliest days, then the architecture of the brain develops normally, and the child grows into an adult who can form trusting relationships, with emotional maturity. When it goes wrong, as so often it does, the child is difficult to educate, and may end up in the criminal justice system, or with chronic health problems, or both. The latest research in attachment theory by Patricia Crittenden, building on John Bowlby's

foundations and Mary Ainsworth's work, brings it together with family systems theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how poor attachment has trans-generational repercussions. Breaking such cycles is hard, and costly, if tackled through therapeutic care for individuals within their families.

Many schools face increasing issues that result from poor attachment. What can church schools do to minimise the difficulties so that a child is able to be educated – to learn, to socialise, to develop towards an adult maturity which means she or he does not replicate the damage when their own children are born?

There is an interesting body of literature that is emerging from the United States and Canada which may help church schools – both primary and secondary – to equip children and young people to develop the emotional self-awareness and skill required for adult life. To give those Birkenhead teenagers the qualities they were looking for. Paul Tough's book *What Makes Children Succeed* stresses the importance of self-control and the nurturing of resilient character. David Brooks' *The Social Animal* also commends the importance of developing habits of the heart that enable the child to delay immediate self-gratification. Brooks argues that 'people with self-control and self-discipline develop habits and strategies that enable them to perceive the world in productive and far-seeing ways' (p. 150). Character, he says, 'emerges gradually out of the mysterious interplay … and … power of small and repetitive action to rewire the fundamental mechanisms of the brain. Small habits and proper etiquette reinforce certain positive ways of seeing the world' (p. 154). Habits of the heart, nurturing a sense of character, enables the formation of the child into adulthood in beneficial ways for the individual and for the society to which she or he belongs.

With Crittenden's work, both books are invaluable resources that suggest how education might be more formative of the person's emotional character to prepare them more helpfully for adult life. Self-control is, of course, one of the nine fruits of the Spirit listed in St Paul's letter to the Galatians. Perhaps church schools could do more to nurture virtues of character that create a second nature that offers emotional and moral knowledge to resource the challenges of adult hood. N T Wright's book *Virtue Reborn* gives an invaluable source for further thinking along these lines. An education to instil emotional self-control and

ability to put the needs of others, including, eventually, their own children, above their own self-gratification.

Habits of the heart; habits of the mind. How do we learn to learn? To think clearly and carefully? Dorothy L Sayers wrote an essay in the 1940s, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, which takes us back to a different era, but which may offer wisdom into today's complex education world. She looks back to the classical education of the Middle Ages, and the practice of training the mind with necessary tools of learning. She does so, however, with an awareness of child developmental theory as it began with Jean Piaget in the 1930s, and maps that new knowledge onto the old wisdom.

Sayers argues that a child has three clear stages in which they learn. The first, from the very beginning, is an absorbent time, when the child will learn all sorts of things quickly and easily, able to memorise, keen to distinguish different categories of things, often enjoying words for the sound of them, without understanding fully what they mean. Sayers believes this is the time for the child to learn as much as possible, knowledge that will offer the bedrock to later stages. The second stage is when the critical faculties start to come into play. The child will enjoy arguing, playing, catching others out. The third stage is when both the knowledge gained in the first stage, and the ability to question and argue in the second stage, come to fruition in the ability to make a good case, to persuade in a cogent, careful way.

Sayers believes that these basic tools of learning are the essential acquisition of a good education which corresponds to the classical *trivium* of the past, of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. This method provides enough for the adult person to think for themselves, not taken in by false propaganda or poor argument.

It is a good essay, well written and persuasive; although she is very aware that even in the 1940s her views would be controversial in educational circles. She is keen, for example, that very small children learn Latin, as an awareness of grammar structure from an early age enables an ability with language that becomes more difficult to acquire the older one gets.

Interestingly, in my local town, the primary schools are beginning to re-introduce Latin. It is making a come-back! Perhaps this might also lead to a greater appreciation of how small children, of primary school age, enjoy learning things off by heart. Sayers emphasises how much fun it can be, giving the child the sense of a satisfying achievement, when presented in a positive way. Parents and carers can help very small, pre-school children to make the connections in their minds that help: nursery rhymes, simple poetry, multiplication tables, prayers all can be made a game that helps the child learn, enables the child to gain the first tool of learning. Playing games that consciously engage the child's natural desire to enjoy words, with a real emphasis on learning things off by heart as fun.

When children start to answer back, Sayers identifies this as the Dialectic stage, and commends the encouragement of argumentativeness, and the proper learning of how to argue properly, with cogent logic and reason.

The rhetorical stage starts to bring learning together. It was perhaps best illustrated by the film 'The History Boys', with its delightful exploration of the pleasure of gaining the tools of learning in order to enjoy the fruits of persuading others. Sayers writes that a certain freedom is demanded that allows the teacher and pupil to range across different disciplines, and develop self-expression on the basis of the foundation laid.

One of the places where Sayers' understanding of education as providing the tools of learning can still be seen in practice today is in the training that a Cathedral chorister receives. From the age of about seven, a child is gradually introduced to highly sophisticated music, often in foreign or ancient language, and learns such material off by heart, to perform to an extremely high standard. By the time the child has grown through puberty, they have a cultural repertoire that they never forget, that inspires the majority to continue to sing and perform. And because they have learned to perform, many go on into public life. It would be interesting to see how much of this pedagogy, that is alive and kicking in Anglican Cathedrals in the UK and around the world, might be transferable to church schools, so that the tools of learning experienced in song schools are developed in other areas of primary and secondary school education. How good it would be if local churches decided to direct resources into promoting music

and singing in choirs, as a fruitful way of countering the excessive individualism and utilitarian trends that shape many of today's children.

The Great Commandment differentiates heart, mind, soul and strength as it also holds them together. What does it mean to have a 'soul'? Perhaps something along these lines: a sense of awe and wonder at that which is mysterious, including language, and words that are not immediately understood. A conscience, that enables the person to tell right from wrong, to feel shame when offence has been caused, to be moved to say sorry. An aesthetic sensibility that prompts the person to respond to beauty, or to find in nature and the universe a freshness deep down things. To have a soul is to begin to understand the height, length, breadth and depth of love as experienced in relationship with other people and with God, as the ultimate ground of loving being. How might a church school enable the child to grow in this dimension? As someone who knows how to nurture their spiritual life? Again, enabling certain habits to develop might help.

One's soul grows through a lifelong exploration of love and thankfulness for the gift of life. When one sees one's personhood in these terms, one has a very different understanding of what it means to be human. Life is based on a sense of gift. It becomes much less easy to think in terms of rights. One does, of course, have rights, as our society conceives them, and it is really important that such rights have their place to ensure justice and opportunity are there for everyone. To base one's understanding of self on gift, rather than right, means, though, that one will tend to give thanks for what one has, rather than forever seek what one does not have. The habit of giving thanks is the beginning.

Closely allied to the word 'gift' is forgiveness. In a world where cycles of revenge and violence can easily become the norm, particularly when the honour of an individual or tribal group is offended, to learn the importance of forgiveness becomes a particular gift that Christianity can offer. To learn to forgive takes time and practice, best begun from one's earliest years; habits of the soul that form the child into someone who is able to love, to give and forgive.

We love God with all our strength.

Robert MacFarlane, in his book *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* writes this:

> The relationship between thinking and walking is also grained deep into language history, illuminated by perhaps the most wonderful etymology I know. The trail begins with our verb to learn, meaning 'to acquire knowledge'. Moving backwards in language time, we reach the Old English *leornian*, 'to get knowledge, to be cultivated'. From *leornian* the path leads further back, into the fricative thickets of Proto-Germanic, and to the word *liznojan*, which has a base sense of 'to follow or to find a track' (from the Proto-Indo-European prefix *leis-*, meaning 'track'.) 'To learn' therefore means at root – at route – 'to follow a track'.

To learn is to follow a path. It encourages the person to walk. There is an increasing research that indicates that walking is good for us. It enables the person to be strong and healthy, fit and active. It has been beloved of writers: many need to walk in order to think – as MacFarlane is suggesting. Walking can enable psychological health too. Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, wrote this:

> Above all, do not lose your desire to walk. Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it. If one just keeps on walking, everything will be all right.

Many are concerned about how much time children spend in front of the screen today, and how, in one short generation, the time spent outside playing has gone. There is a growing literature on the toxicity of childhood, commending instead time spent out of doors. The Forest Schools movement actively seeks a re-engagement of children with the natural world, not only for their own fitness and well being, but also because a sense of good stewardship of the natural environment is an increasingly urgent imperative. When children know and understand the natural world around them, they begin to honour and care for it in ways that are not possible in ignorance.

With an underlying understanding that the world around is an evolving created order, revealing the creative love of God, rich in its diversity, church schools could do – are doing – much to strengthen the child's sense of awe and stewardship of the natural world. Physical wellbeing and strength of body also result from such engagement with the world outside the classroom.

So – some ideas that might enhance the Christian ethos and culture of church schools by focusing on the heart, mind, soul and strength of the child. Education is viewed here not as a means to the end of the self-fulfilment of a good career, or the self-realisation of the individual, or the self-expression of a particular

‘identity’. The goal of education is that the person may grow as a human being who is able to love, because she or he has emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical wellbeing and health.

To love with heart, mind, soul and strength, gives the child and then adult a foundation in life that begins with the formative processes of education. This is to foster a sense of human personhood marked by self-giving, forgiveness, love of others, commitment to public service, and to the natural environment. Such persons are likely, also, to have a good sense of self-esteem and worth.

Self-worth begins as the growing person looks outward from self, learning habits of the heart, mind, soul and strength that take her or him away from self-centredness and the desire for immediate self-gratification, towards the ability to be self-giving, putting the needs of others before one’s own. The Great Commandment asks of the human person that she or he love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and the neighbour as self. To know what it is to base one’s life on love and forgiveness, thankfulness for the gift of life, and to express that love with self-giving resilience of character, is to begin to realise a mature human personhood.

Such qualities would have enabled Frank Field’s teenagers in Birkenhead to find what they were seeking of their school education: the resources to be good parents. Church of England schools are well placed to make a greater distinctive contribution to that end.