

## **HOW TO TEACH THAT WHICH CANNOT BE TAUGHT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Starting with Old Testament era this article surveys the traditions of religious education within the Judaeo-Christian setting. Home was the first and primary environment for teaching religious values among the ancient Hebrew people. In particular the fathers' role in teaching sacred precepts and practices for their boys was significant. There is little or no data on the role of religion in whatever formal education was available in ancient Judah or Israel.

Within the Christian era, the development started with what was at first unorganised training of converts and ends with large church operated school systems. This history includes several stages and many diverse points of emphasis, new developments or insights. At first the emphasis was on learning the Christian doctrine in the form of confessions and some moral guidelines for life. As the church defined its rituals and ceremonies they became more and more important even at the expense of dogmas. The article also outlines the rise of church operated schools and the impact of secularism as a development in government controlled educational standards.

How to teach that which cannot be taught? is a question stemming from the days of the Protestant Reformation. It shows human inadequacy in trying to do what in the end is a work of God. History does not answer this question; maybe it is a proof of the fact that the final and best way of teaching Christian values has not been found yet.

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and*

*when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Dt. 6:4-7)*

Parents and religious communities have always felt the need of communicating spiritual values and practices to the young. The quote from Deuteronomy above is one of the best-known Biblical statements on religious education. Uncounted parallel texts can be found, not only in the Bible but also in the sacred writings of other religions as well. As soon as the essentials of a religion have been formulated, there is a need to pass them on to the children. This article sets out to summarise the background and development of religious education within the Judaeo-Christian setting.

Every founder of a major religion, Moses and Jesus included, is called or considered a teacher. In the Bible the teaching tradition was carried on by prophets, priests, and apostles. There are times when the Bible uses the word *teacher* as a substitute for the word *prophet*<sup>1</sup> making the association between education and the Christian religion closer than commonly assumed.

The marriage between education and faith is ultimately confirmed by the fact that a significant portion of the Christian Scriptures is essentially intended for didactic purposes. This is the stated intent of the Torah, the Old Testament Law.<sup>2</sup> There is a distinct educational overtone in much of Biblical history, and a portion of the Old Testament is called Wisdom literature, texts intended for the instruction of the young.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, much of the New Testament has an educational flavour too. The Gospels as well as the Epistles were written to coach the readers in divine ideals.<sup>4</sup>

## **Religious Education in Bible Times**

Biblical data has very few references to schools. For the millennia of Bible history there was little formal education on offer, and the hubs of religious and ethical instruction for many was the home and the temple. The latter offered little for the young, except observation and some participation, and therefore the Bible places a clear emphasis on the

home as the focal point of religious and ethical teaching. This is a concept reflected in the text quoted from Deuteronomy earlier.

Part of this duty fell on the mother. Modern readers may fully agree with the post-Reformation scholar, Georg von Anhalt, who acclaimed the mother the greatest bishop and the most important teacher of all.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, reason to question how widely such sentiments were shared among ancient Hebrew people. Admittedly, there are many Bible stories or texts, for example in the book of Proverbs, to amply demonstrate the vital importance of the mother in bringing up children.<sup>6</sup> In the Old Testament setting, the mother's role was associated with the care of the infants, small children, and girls while it was the father who taught older children, boys in particular. He was considered the transmitter of religious norms.<sup>7</sup>

The girls normally learned household duties from their mother and the father taught the boys his profession, whether a farmer, cattle breeder, craftsman, priest or judge.<sup>8</sup> Along with this, it was the father's sacred duty to teach his sons the truth and practice of religion.<sup>9</sup> The educational role of the father actually explains why priests, prophets, teachers and counsellors, who on occasion shared an educational role, are at times called 'father' in the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup>

One of the known efforts towards formal religious education in Old Testament times is the so-called 'schools of the prophets' alluded to in the stories of Samuel and Elisha. The Internet shows a surprisingly large number of modern ventures that declare themselves a continuation of these Biblical schools — hardly a valid assertion as the Bible tells next to nothing of their mission, curriculum, or teaching methods.<sup>11</sup>

The word 'teacher' is mentioned a few times.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have little agreement on how widespread the actual practice of formal teaching was in Old Testament times. Taking into consideration the wider Near Eastern context, one notes that outside of ancient Israel there are several school texts dating as far back as 2500 BC. Scribes and priests and probably many others needed reading and writing skills. Even one of the oldest Hebrew texts known, the Gezer Calendar from 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, may be a schoolboy's exercise.<sup>13</sup> However, while schools that taught literary skills might have existed in the capital cities of Samaria and

Jerusalem as well as other major towns, there is no knowledge of any religious component in this form of education.

This does not mean that the training of those not being able to attend schools would not have included any teaching of reading or writing. There is a widely noted case of a young man caught accidentally on a field in Succoth, who was able to write.<sup>14</sup> However, a single case can hardly be taken as a proof of a high literacy rate. It is also suggested that prophet Isaiah<sup>15</sup> shows his personal pedagogic talent in taunting the rote learning practice of the first temple era, which failed to help the learners grasp the inner meaning of issues.

Any formal or home education in Bible times was primarily for the young men. From the viewpoint of gender equality there does not appear to have been much improvement over the subsequent centuries. In the days of Jesus, education was still offered rather exclusively for males only. It is known that even most daughters of the rich, including princesses in Herod's court, were illiterate.<sup>16</sup>

## **Early Christian Education**

The success of the early Christian church brought a huge educational challenge. Thousands joined the Christian movement and they needed to be taught the Christian principles. At first this was done in a somewhat casual way through preaching, letters, conversation, or debate. The fact that Christianity soon fragmented into numerous more or less heretical factions may be an indication of the overwhelming difficulty of the task. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD most large churches had established catechetical schools to instruct the newly converted in preparation for baptism. The importance of these schools is proven by the fact that the most famous among them, Alexandria and Antioch, later stood as symbols for much of the theological development of the first millennium.

The original intent of the catechetical school was to teach pagans converted to Christianity. The goal of this early Christian instruction was to teach dogma in the form of confessions and commandments complemented by moral counsel for daily living. With significant changes in emphasis, dogmatic and moral teaching has remained an essential part of Christian education for nearly two thousand years.

At some point during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the catechumens had a teaching program that lasted up to three years. But it appears to have been a common notion that the children of Christian families did not need the same amount of religious instruction. During the patristic era, the two essentials for Christian children were the confessions of faith and the Lord's Prayer. These were regarded a minimum for being considered a respectable Christian.<sup>17</sup>

The significance of the catechetical schools gradually faded when infant baptism rather than conversion became the prevailing method of entry into the church. This change did not diminish the task of education but changed its nature. The young still needed to be educated in the essentials of the Christian faith, and in most places the confessions and basic prayers kept their position as the best expressions of Christian faith and practice.

## **Medieval Period**

When the Catholic Church was fully established around AD 700, the Decalogue was added to this unofficial curriculum. A few centuries later, Thomas of Aquinas appended the doctrinal teaching goals of the Western Church to include the double commandment of love supplemented by Ave Maria and the Sacraments for the more committed. Such minor changes, however, are of little significance.<sup>18</sup>

However, one of the noteworthy developments of the early medieval period is that gradually the Church's basic ceremonies and rituals were being defined and these practices became increasingly important in Christian education, sometimes at the expense of doctrines. One also needs to keep in mind that priests who were looked upon as teachers had normally very limited formal education themselves and therefore it was easier for them to offer just a rather casual reiteration of the basics of Christian doctrine and place more emphasis on the ceremonies, rituals, and practice.<sup>19</sup>

This was an important shift in the educational strategy of the Medieval Church. While the ideal may still have been for all Christians to know the Apostolic Confession, the Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria, or the Ten Commandments it was perfectly possible to be a good Catholic by simply

observing a few basic practices like the Friday abstinence, Sunday Mass, Lenten fast, without the ability to recite long confessions or prayers. The ceremonies and practices were easily taught and one could, if necessary, measure their observance. This medieval transition from theoretical to practical is still a notable difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant schooling. Protestant education tends to stress doctrine and the Bible while Catholic schools put emphasis on exercising the worship practices of the church.<sup>20</sup>

The medieval period was not without its scholars, however. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, many of the monasteries promoted learning. Monastic scholarship and cathedral schools prospered during the early Carolingian era. After a decline of a century or two, there is abundant evidence of vigorous intellectual pursuits soon after the year 1000. There were theological debates. The monastic school of Le Bec produced independent thinkers like Anselm, while Abelard reached fame as the director of the cathedral school in Paris.<sup>21</sup>

Growing international trade contributed to the need of learning and the rise of universities that soon left monastic and cathedral schools in their shadow. The universities were at first guilds of teachers sometimes located on a church related property. Soon after the establishment of the first European universities (Salerno, Cordova, Bologna, and Paris — 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) Pope Innocent III realised the potential of these universities and did his best to tie them to the church. He created rules for their operation, and to avoid any secularisation, he made sure that monks were the majority among the teachers (in particular Dominican and Franciscan monks). Some monastic and cathedral schools continued to function alongside the universities.<sup>22</sup>

It is necessary to make one final observation on the content of religious education during the first millennium and a half of the Christian era. It is a sobering fact that starting from early patristic era there was little of what Protestants today would call the gospel in anything available from the church fathers or learned Christian leaders. Instead, Christianity was equated with adherence to certain moral codes, confessional statements and prayers learned by heart, and knowing how to participate in worship activities. Exceptions were few and far between. It was only at the time of the Reformation that a change of heart, rarely

pondered before, became a central agenda of Christian religious education.

## The Reformation

The Reformation brought new content to the Christian faith, an emphasis on the Bible and on matters of the heart: conversion and faith. Martin Luther did his best to point religious education in a new direction. Worship practice was changed. People needed to be taught and therefore pews were brought into churches to allow for longer sermons and lectures on the essentials of the Christian faith. In Calvin's Geneva there were even times when tests or exams on sermon content were administered with punishments for those who did not pass. The Catholics followed suit with sermons and seating in their churches too.<sup>23</sup>

Luther rose above the shallow medieval thinking and he, maybe for the first time in Christian history, addressed a key problem in religious education. He understood clearly how difficult it is to communicate the central issues of faith. How to give instruction that leads to a change of heart, conversion? This, he believed, is a work of God and therefore totally beyond human control. How to teach that which cannot be taught? In fact, Luther considered teaching religion an impossible task because man cannot have faith in God out of his own strength and power. Conversion, he claimed, belongs to the spiritual regimen while teaching and learning were part of the earthly. Therefore, human teachers can only deal with head learning where the outcomes can be measured by tests and quizzes, but the work of God and true spiritual experiences can never be measured. A priest or a teacher, Luther insisted, cannot produce faith in the students, because the limited cannot generate what is unlimited.<sup>24</sup>

Trying to communicate the essence of the Christian faith, Martin Luther wrote his *Greater Catechism*, a summary of the essentials of Christian faith for the ordinary people. It is the work of a genius and a book not unworthy of attention by those who teach the Bible today. With younger children in mind, he also prepared an abbreviated version of the book.<sup>25</sup>

The Catholic side soon followed his example. The Roman Church produced Catechisms because it too wanted to define what is essential in religious education. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century catechisms had mushroomed to the degree that in America alone more than 500 different versions were in use, the *Westminster Catechism* being the most common.<sup>26</sup>

## **Rise of Church Operated Schools**

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance all schools, by and large, belonged to churches. The Roman Catholic Church continued to establish new schools both in Europe and North America. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the [Anglican] Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge established 1,500 charity schools to educate poor children in impoverished suburbs.<sup>27</sup>

What happened in North America was important for the development of Christian educational systems as we know them today. On the one hand, Colonial Americans had extremely strong Christian convictions. On the other hand, they also had a keen sense for religious freedom and multiplicity of churches. Many of the early immigrants had left the old world because they were persecuted due to their fervent religious convictions. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable that the first American educational legislation emphasised religion and Christianity.

Examples of early American school legislation are the Massachusetts Bay *General School Act* (1642) and *Old Deluder Satan Law* (1647) which tie education to Christian values and the Bible.<sup>28</sup> In 1655 the *New Haven Code* required that all children be made able duly to read the Scriptures . . . and in some competent measure to understand the main grounds and principles of Christian Religion necessary to salvation.<sup>29</sup> The earliest textbooks reflect this and some border the somewhat utopian ideal of keeping the Bible as the most important, if not the only textbook, in education.<sup>30</sup> These Bible school sentiments were never expressed with similar force in Europe but they are now an important part of the background of Protestant schools the world over.

In the first place, most community schools were based on Protestant ideology and included daily Scripture readings from the King James Bible, prayer, and Protestant hymns.<sup>31</sup> In addition to being Protestant,

this education was also Anti-Catholic which pushed American Catholics into establishing their own schools.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the large numbers of Catholic Irish immigrants in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a significant factor in the rise of parochial schools in America.

The Catholics had established their first school in America as early as 1606 but the strengthening anti-Catholic notions of 19<sup>th</sup> century America prompted the church to establish hundreds of new schools. In spite of this, most Catholic children still attended community schools and political pressure and teachers' unwillingness to have theological debate in the classroom began bending American schools into a more secular direction.<sup>33</sup> While individual Protestant churches had operated some schools or colleges earlier, as a reaction to the diminishing religious content in public schools, Protestant churches also established many schools and, by 1900, there was about 3500 church owned schools in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Jewish children usually attended public schools but had special religious instruction in what were called Hebrew schools.<sup>35</sup>

## **National Educational Systems**

It was the era of Enlightenment, in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which brought about a change in the culture of education. For the first time, many leading thinkers were convinced that all needed an education. The churches of the day did not have the resources or the vision to bring schools to all communities, and one after the other, national governments began establishing nationwide school systems. The rise of public schools in Europe and North America during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries must be considered one of the most significant changes in education ever.<sup>36</sup>

With national churches (and a limited tolerance for those of other faiths) European countries usually followed the lead of their church in choosing materials for religious education. The curriculum of the first European school systems was strongly religious, and it was common for the local priests to be involved in the teaching and sometimes the administration of community schools.

However, the church's dominant role in European societies started to fall apart about a century ago. Socialist parties entered politics and among other things demanded a full separation between the church and

the state. They called for the severance of ties between religion and education, and by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most European public school systems were non-confessional. Some curricula included no religion whatsoever, while others had a minimal amount of general, frequently pluralistic, religious study.<sup>37</sup>

This parallels with North American battles for removing prayer and religious symbols from public schools. An era of secular education has started and engulfed public education. In most countries of the world, schools and education are government controlled; and there are numerous occasions where government learning goals, whether secular or religious, pluralistic, or even scientific, are at odds with the goals, teachings or values represented by Christian schools.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

One may deduce a few points from these brief observations. First of all, the form of religious education has changed over the years. The venue has changed from the home to the temple or the church and to the school. It would be a grave mistake to think that Christian education must be carried on the way it has been done in the past. When society is in the midst of massive change, Christian education must not be frozen into forms that belong to an earlier era.

Secondly, as public (or even religious) schools turn more secular, it is all the more necessary that those committed to Christian values place an even stronger emphasis on Christian education. There may also be a need for rethinking the roles of the home, the church, or the community in the religious development of young people. However, one should not conclude that the time for Christian schools is over.

Thirdly, it might be a beneficial exercise to research what emphasis gives best results in Christian education? Is the best option still to follow in the footsteps of the Protestant reformers and teach Christian doctrines and Bible for the purpose of creating interest in Christianity? Or should Christian life and worship (cf. Catholic education) play a bigger role in education?

Finally, thinking of the Reformation era, one needs to keep in mind that the essence of the Christian faith lies in the gift of God's grace,

which cannot be transmitted by teaching. The sentiment of Deuteronomy, living for God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength (Dt. 6:4) may be what most Christian educators are after, but history does not show the way to achieve this goal. The author of Deuteronomy proposes study and ample repetition as the way. Martin Luther, on the other hand, believed that it is only achieved through a divine miracle. History is unlikely to produce the answer for crucial questions like this. If history proves anything, it is more likely to show that the best way of doing religious education has not been found yet. However, regardless of the method, the goal must be clear, for without a goal and without a vision all education, religious or otherwise, is meaningless.<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. 1Chr 25.8; Ez 7.6, 11, 12,21, Mt 7.29; 8.19.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Dt 4.9, 14; 6.1,5-9, 20-25; 11.1-7, 18-21; etc.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the book of Proverbs.

<sup>4</sup> F rst D, *Teach, Instruct, Tradition, Education, Discipline*, 3:759-781.

<sup>5</sup> Bartholom us, Wolfgang, *Einfuerung in the Religions P dagogik* , 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the stories of Moses, Samson, Samuel.

<sup>7</sup> DeVaux, Roland, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Wolff, Hans Walter, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 179.

<sup>9</sup> DeVaux, 49.

<sup>10</sup> DeVaux, 49f.

<sup>11</sup> Internet search (Google, Oct. 15. 2006) gave 13.700 hits for schools of the prophets .

<sup>12</sup> E.g. 1Chr 25.8 (NIV).

<sup>13</sup> Albright, W.F, *Gezer Calendar, Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 92:16-26.

<sup>14</sup> Jgs 8.14.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 28.9-13.

<sup>16</sup> Jeremias, Joachim, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 373.

<sup>17</sup> Bartholom us, 2-4, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Bartholom us, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Bartholom us, 2-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Education, Catholic Encyclopedia*. [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05295b.htm>] (Oct 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Christensen, Torben, and G ransson Sven, *Kirkkohistoria I*, 391-399.

<sup>22</sup> Christensen and G ransson, 431-438.

<sup>23</sup> Tait, Jennifer Woodruff, *Seats of Learning*, Christian History & Biography, Issue 90, Spring 2006, Vol. XXV, No. 2, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Pruuki, Lassi, *Miten opettaa sit mit ei voi opettaa? Uskon ja kasvatuksen suhde Martti H. Haavion pedagogiikassa*, 90,91.

<sup>25</sup> Bartholom us, 8f; 14f.

<sup>26</sup> Shenandoah, April, *History of America s Education*; Universities, Textbooks and Our Founders, Last of Three Parts. The American Partisan. [www.american-partisan.com/cols/2002/Shenandoah/qtr1/0312.htm] (July 3, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Coffman, Elesha, *Christian Education for All*, Christian History & Biography Newsletter 2001. Christianity Today. [http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2001/mar30.html] (July 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Anon, *Education Timeline*, Interactive State House. [http://www.mass.gov/statehouse/ed\_timeline\_text.htm] (Oct 26, 2006)

<sup>29</sup> Shenandoah, April, *History of America s Education*; Universities, Textbooks and Our Founders, Last of Three Parts. The American Partisan. [http://www.american-partisan.com/cols/2002/shenandoah/qtr1/0312.htm.] (July 3, 2006).

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<sup>31</sup> Anon. *Anti-Catholicism and the History of Catholic School Funding*. www.catholicleague.org [http://www.catholicleague.org/research/schoolfunding.htm] (July 3, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Mannard, Joseph G., *American Anti-Catholicism and its Literature*, excerpted from: *Ex Libris*, vol 4, No. 1 (1981). Pp. 1-9.

<sup>33</sup> Proefriedt, William A, *Opening Doors*, America, The National Catholic Weekly, http://www.americamagazine.org/gettext.cfm?articleTypeID=1&textID=2637&issueID=414. Cf. Anon. *Anti-Catholicism and the History of Catholic School Funding*. www.catholicleague.org [http://www.catholicleague.org/research/schoolfunding.htm] (July 3, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> *A Brief Overview of Catholic Schools in America* nd. National Catholic Educational Association http://www.ncea.org/newinfo/nceacommunications/overview.asp. (July 3, 2006)

<sup>35</sup> Anon. *Separating Church and State*. http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/factover/ch8.htm (July 3, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Bartholom us, 17-24.

<sup>37</sup> Bartholom us, 17-24.

<sup>38</sup> E.g. Studemann, Fredrick, *Fundamentalist Education Raises Eyebrows in Britain*, Financial Times, Aug 1, 2005. [http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1455237/posts] (Oct 27, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Schlemmer, Hans, *Die religi se pers nlichkeit in der Erziehung*, 39.

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