

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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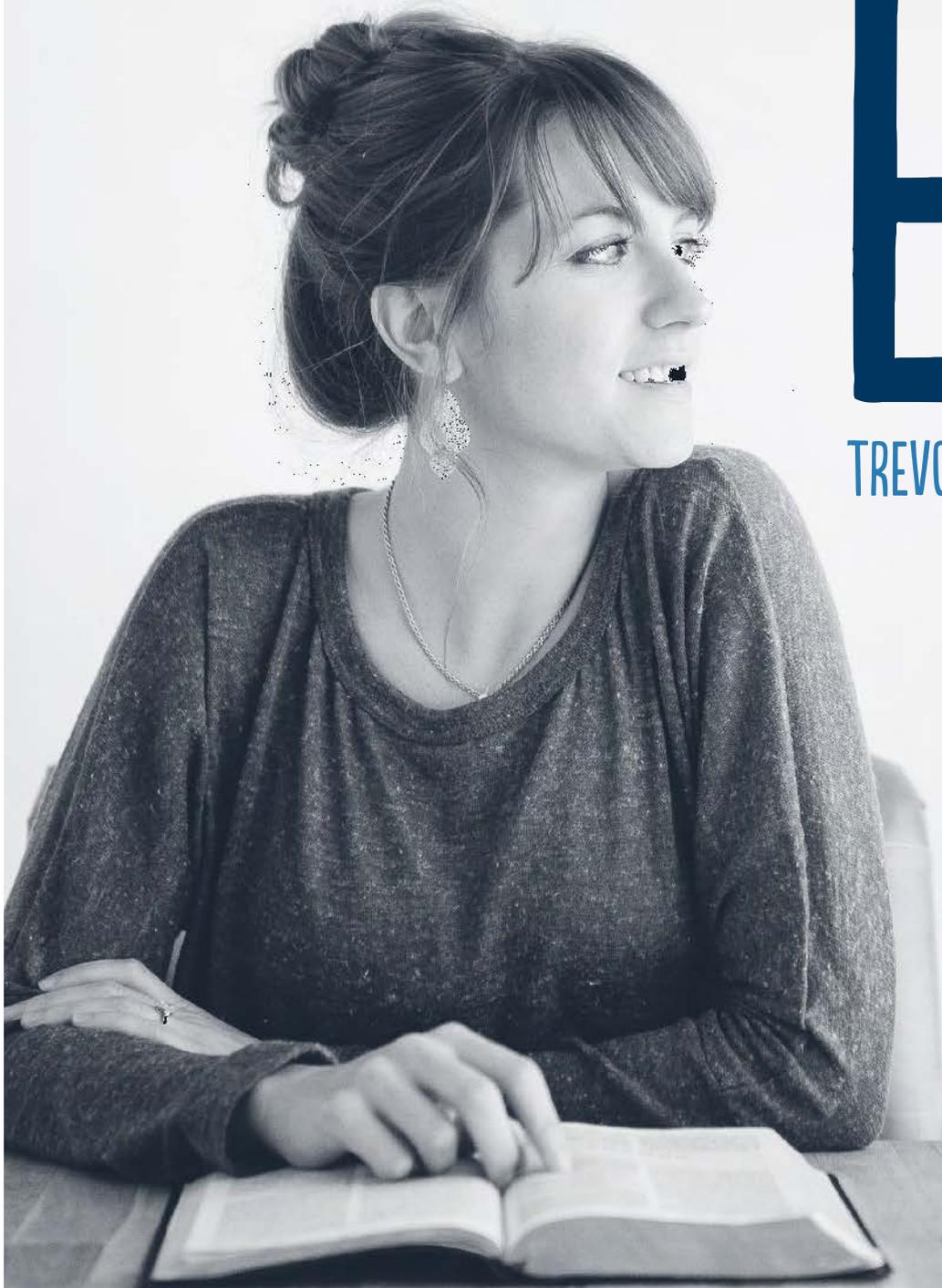
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The Bible

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TREVOR COOLING IS PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AT CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY IN THE UK. HE RECENTLY SPENT THREE WEEKS IN SYDNEY GIVING LECTURES AND WORKING WITH TEACHERS IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS. HERE HE SHARES SOME OF THE MATERIAL HE USED DURING THAT VISIT.



CATION

In 2010 I had the privilege of working with colleagues from the USA, UK, and Australia developing an approach to Christian education which focused on pedagogy rather than curriculum content. The result was an approach that we called *What If Learning* which comprises three basic steps for teachers to use in thinking about the learning experiences they create in their classrooms (www.whatif.co.uk). The approach aims to develop Christian virtues and focuses on the question “What type of person do we hope will emerge from the learning experiences provided in my classroom?” Our aspiration was that Christian teachers in any country, working with any age group and teaching any subject could use the approach to develop their own distinctively Christian learning experiences for their pupils.

Thanks to the generous support from a number of Christian charities, in 2013–2014 we were able to research how Christian teachers experienced the approach when they tried it out for the first time. We spent a year with 14 different teachers working in three English church schools, observing them

teach, interviewing them and their pupils, and reading the reflective logs that they kept. There are some really good stories of what they achieved (more of that later), but a number of them also struggled significantly with the challenge. In particular they seemed to perceive the task to be to ‘lever-in’ Christian content into lessons where it didn’t seem to fit. So they described the experience as “weird”. For them, it really didn’t feel appropriate to maths, sport, geography, and the other subject disciplines they represented. One interesting outcome was that many of them seemed to perceive the task as telling their pupils Christian truths, so they operated very much in transmission rather than inquiry mode when it came to developing a Christian perspective, and that just didn’t feel right to them—hence the weirdness.¹ The core problem seems to be a misunderstanding of the notion of Christian pedagogy, which has its roots in misconceptions about the nature of Christian knowing and of the way in which the Bible operates as an authority in shaping the learning experience.

NATURE OF CHRISTIAN KNOWING

There are two conceptions of knowing which seem to be very influential amongst young people in the UK and, I suspect, in Australia. The first is what I call modernist certainty, which puts huge emphasis on objectivity (what people sometimes call *hard* knowledge). In this the ideal form of knowledge is scientific. This view is championed by the new atheists and treats Christian belief as at best unnecessary clutter and at worst as irrational and even toxic.² True knowledge is then seen as obvious common sense and any attempt to offer a Christian perspective is deemed to sink into irrationality. The second conception is radical postmodernism. This emphasises human subjectivity and maintains that knowledge is simply a construction of the human mind, a purely personal response to our experience. This is most prevalent in the arts and literature. The most important thing in this approach is that our response is authentic to us. But there is no objective truth in education,

only, as Clive Erricker an English educationalist put it, the different fictions that children construct. So students retort “that’s just your opinion” when using this conception of knowing.

Both these views are, to my mind, incompatible with a Christian understanding of knowledge; the modernist because it rejects the contribution of Christian belief and the post-modernist because it rejects the idea of revealed truth. Recently a number of writers have been offering an alternative which they call critical realism.³ They describe it as constituted by three key ideas:

Ontological reality, which means that there is an objective reality that exists which constitutes true knowledge. For Christians this is the revelation of God through the Bible that is embodied in Jesus.

Epistemic relativity, which means the recognition that all knowledge is a flawed human interpretation of that reality, or as the Apostle Paul expresses it, “we see through a glass darkly” and can only know in part. In other words we all interpret our encounter with reality through a worldview which influences how we understand it.

Judgemental rationality, which means that in order to progress towards true knowledge, humans have to take account of each other’s interpretations and make judgements about their truth on the basis of the available

HOW DOES THIS ANALYSIS HELP US TO UNDERSTAND OUR TEACHERS’ SENSE OF WEIRDNESS WHEN ASKED TO TEACH CHRISTIANLY? WAS IT POSSIBLY BECAUSE THEY HELD A MODERNIST VIEW OF THE BIBLE?

evidence. This then constitutes learning, the process of understanding and evaluating the different claims people make as to the meaning and significance of the information they encounter in education using the best available evidence with a view to discerning God’s truth.

On a modernist view education boils down to learning certain knowledge so that one can make *decisive judgements*. On the postmodern view it boils down to making *authentic responses* which resonate personally. On the critical realist view it involves making *wise judgements* from within a Christian understanding of the world whilst taking account of and listening carefully to other interpretations.

THE BIBLE AS OUR AUTHORITY IN EDUCATION

How does this analysis help us to understand our teachers’ sense of weirdness when asked to teach Christianly? Was it possibly because they held a modernist view of the Bible? Certainly it seemed that they perceived the task of Christian education as transmitting Christian certainties through telling their pupils what was obviously true. This meant that there was no room for debate about those truths in the classroom nor was there a mechanism available to them which enabled them to see that Christian belief could operate as a shaping perspective rather than just as uncontroversial content to be passed on as decisive truth in between teaching their subject. A critical realist view of the Bible however emphasises that it is indeed revelation of ontological truth, but that discerning that truth always entails a process of interpretation in which judgements between different understandings have to be made.

The significance of this insight for an understanding of Christian learning is illustrated by NT Wright (1992) in his widely-cited analogy in which he compares living under the authority of the biblical text with the task of writing a final act for a newly-discovered but unfinished Shakespeare play. Wright asks us to imagine how experienced Shakespearean actors would go about this task. He suggests two significant insights. First, they would seek to be faithful to the authority of the narrative of the unfinished play and to Shakespeare’s wider corpus of writing. Their suggested final act for the play must be justifiably Shakespearian, a concept which acts, appropriately, as an authoritative constraint on the actors’ creativity. Their aim would be to retrieve the intended direction

of Shakespeare’s story line. Second, however, they would need to be innovative in writing the new text and this creativity would inevitably be influenced by their own interests and particular contextual setting and would result in a diversity of final acts for the play. In a discussion of the quality of the endings created by the different actors, judgements would be made *both* on the basis of the authors’ quality of creativity *and* on the validity of the ending as a faithfully Shakespearean piece of writing.

Wright argues that Christians seeking to live their lives under the authority of Scripture face a similar task to these Shakespearean actors. They are seeking to be faithful people of God in ‘the last act’ of the human story by living in the light of the story of God’s dealings with humanity found in the preceding acts as described in the Bible. The analogy affirms acceptance of the Bible as authoritatively God’s Word, but replaces the transmission of decisive knowledge with creative faithfulness to the Bible as the shaping concept of how that authority works.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY SHAPING CLASSROOM PEDAGOGY

How do these insights impact on teachers’ understanding of what it means to teach from a Christian perspective? I will finish by describing the work of one sports teacher we observed in the research to illustrate.

James was troubled by the culture of popular sport and its influence on boys. In particular he was concerned by the predominance of a ‘win at all costs’ mentality, which he saw as particularly transmitted through football. His vision was that the experience of learning sport will form an alternative character in his students, the vision of which derives from the school’s Christian ethos. One thing that he was very clear about was that he didn’t want “to compromise the curriculum” by using sports teaching as a vehicle for Christian sermonettes or epilogues. He had decided that his approach to teaching would be to emphasise learning to coach, rather than winning with its association of attaining personal glory through becoming an elite sports performer.

The focus of the observed lesson was learning the push-pass in hockey. Certainly the idea that there is a Christian way to do this would seem very ‘weird’ to most teachers—maybe you pray for success just before the stick makes contact with the ball!⁴ In the lesson, James first demonstrated the components of a good push-pass, then he split the class into pairs and they had to perfect their technique together. When asked subsequently what they imagined they were learning in the lesson, the students said straight away that they were “learning how to be an encourager”. The reason for

this was that the assessed task for the lesson had been to coach their partner in the skill of the push-pass and to record what techniques were used in encouraging them in their skill development.

James’ comment on this lesson was that without the challenge to reframe his teaching within a Christian ethos, “I would have just taught the push-pass individually as performers, so the thing that definitely had to change was that there was a coaching element”.

Critical realism is manifest in James’ approach because he has recognised that there are different ways of framing

the meaning and significance of the knowledge content of the lesson. The influential view was that sport is about promoting personal elite performance. He felt that was not particularly compatible with a biblical vision of what it is to be human. So he decided to reframe the subject content. Very importantly he articulated this change of perspective to the boys in his class and they were able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches. In my view James was fulfilling the calling to be a fifth act Christian in a sports classroom in 21st century Britain.⁵

CATEGORY	Modernist certainty OR Literal realism	Critical realism	Radical postmodernism OR Nonrealism
DESCRIPTION	Certain certainty	Certain certainty Certain uncertainty	Certain uncertainty
CRICKET UMPIRES DISCUSSING THEIR TASK	“I call ‘em as they are”	“I call ‘em as I see ‘em”	“There ain’t nothin’ till I call ‘em”
WHAT CAN WE KNOW?	Everything	Something	Nothing
ETHICAL STANCE	Confident,arrogant, contentious	Assured, humble, modest, fallible	Cynical, sceptical, despairing
THEOLOGICAL STANCE	Pharisaism	Pauline “We see through a glass darkly” 1 Cor. 13:12	Ecclesiastes
WORLDVIEW STANCE	Modernism,scientism, naturalism, foundationalism	Premodern, Christian theism	Postmodernism, nihilism
THE PLACE OF REASON	Too much confidence in science and autonomous human reason	Recognition of what reason can and cannot do	Too little confidence in divinely led human reason

Modified from Edlin (2006, p. 104) *Engaging the Culture: Christians at work in education*.

Endnotes

- 1 The report is available at <https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/research-knowledge-exchange/national-institute-christian-education-research/docs/christian-ethos-research-project-summary-report-dec-2014.pdf>
- 2 For a fuller development of this point see my article, *Doing God in Education* which can be downloaded at <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2010/12/02/doing-god-in-education>
- 3 See Brad Shipway, *A Critical Realist Perspective of Education* (Routledge, 2011) for a helpful overview and Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism* (Routledge, 2014) for a detailed exposition.
- 4 When I ask teachers how they would teach the push-pass in a Christian way, they usually respond by suggesting it is an object lesson illustrating the discipline of the Christian life. So the lesson becomes an opportunity for an epilogue; exactly what James wanted to avoid.
- 5 For further information including discussion of questions this approach raises see my book *Distinctively Christian Learning* available at http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/cart.php?target=product&product_id=17618&category_id=409

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- Edlin, R. (2006). In pursuit of an authentic Christian paradigm. In R. Edlin & J. Ireland (Eds.), *Engaging the culture: Christians at work in education*. Blacktown: National Institute for Christian Education.
- Wright, N. T. (1992). *The New Testament and the people of God*. London: SPCK.