

Public Education and The Church in Singapore

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Dr Roland Chia, Director of the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry, wrote to ask if I could help us reflect on how Christians and the church should respond to "...some major changes not only in the structure but also the philosophy of public education in Singapore." He mentioned, as examples of the changes, "the emphases on creative thinking and IT", and "the more non-academic aspects of personal development, like character development and the heightening of social consciousness". In the fifty or so minutes I have to do the job, I have to take it that we know what those so-called "major" changes are, and focus mainly on the discussion; indeed, going by Dr Chia's letter, which already enumerated the changes I should comment upon, I am probably right in assuming we all read the papers and have children who went or are going through the changes.

Dr Chia distinguished for us changes in the "philosophy", and changes in the "structure" and content of Singapore education, the latter being such things as introducing IT and thinking programmes, restructuring values education, and, of course, streaming. I shall be concerned almost exclusively with philosophical issues, because we have time only to discuss major thrusts of aims and policies, and more importantly, because it is precisely the ultimate, and therefore philosophical, implications of those changes of structures and programmes that should be the major cause of concern for the church, as I shall show.

I want first to observe that (if unanalysed and loosely defended policy assertions and aims may be accorded the label "philosophy"), Singapore's educational "philosophy" has remained basically unchanged over the years. In step with the pragmatism of government at large, it has been to maximise the realisation of each student's potential so that he can fend for his own survival and contribute to the nation's survival and well-being, survival and well-being being seen, if not exclusively then largely, in terms of material and economic progress. The changes, then, have been only a matter of attempted adaptations and fine-tunings of the means, incorporating the use of knowledge, skills and the appropriate sensitivities and affections, towards achieving those pragmatic goals.

The by-and-large pragmatic stance of government needs little showing. I remember Lee Kuan Yew, at a press conference announcing the break-up of Malaysia, taking out a written note (because the content was "too important" to be said off-the-cuff) and reading that Singapore would go "even to the devil" if that was necessary for her survival. He has all

along been non-communist rather than anti-communist: so it would seem that, for him, no morality and principles have been at issue in the matter; it is only that communism cannot work in Singapore. And now, in answering criticism that Singapore has been overly restrictive of freedoms and other moral rights, he says we should only have “democracy that works”. Our tough punishments for drug and other crimes are defended largely on their pragmatic use as deterrents, and I wonder how many Singaporean eyebrows are raised whenever we read the chief justice, in our high court of justice, defending some harsh punishment not on grounds of justice and fairness but their efficacy as deterrents. The likelihood of the use of punishment as deterrent clashing with justice seems never to have occurred to him. Just last year, I was appalled to listen to Lee, on BBC *Hard Talk*, justifying capital punishment for drug trafficking by saying that we would have to build many more prisons if we didn’t hang them: “we are an international airport, and they keep coming through”! The appropriateness of all these arguably disproportionate penalties, Lee now tells us in his memoirs he had learnt from the Japanese effective use of them during the occupation!

But am I not being somewhat slanted, not noting that, especially in recent years, government has also been wanting a gracious society, and, in the context of education, promoting morality, family values, the humanities, the arts, thinking and creativity? And so it has, and I have lived long enough to have become quite tolerant of humankind’s untidiness in thinking and policy-making. I am quite ready to concede that often persons who have arrived at positions of power have done so mainly on their pragmatic prowess, so that when they pronounce on matters requiring philosophic clarity, they tend to be less than fair to their own standpoint, overly stressing pragmatic aims and concerns when talking of things that call for some pragmatism, and in so doing undermining what they themselves would wish to say on other occasions. I am sure that when queried as to whether, in pressing for effective deterrence in the law courts, they meant to exclude values, such as justice and compassion (which are among the moral requirements they have made our young to pledge to abide by every day before school, saying they want to be one united people, in order to build a democratic society based on justice and equality), they would point to the other things they have promoted, like campaigns towards graciousness and Confucian humanity, in order to refute the charge of being overly pragmatic in their vision and aims. And so also, in regard to education, they may point to the recent short-lived but earnest attempt to have religious studies in school, the stress on informal

learning activities outside the normal curriculum, and on values and family values education, and the like, and the statements of school mission and aims that assert the maximising of every pupil's potentials in all-round development that includes thinking, creativity and the arts, etc. Admittedly, it has in recent years been more and more acknowledged that, even though there had been a period in Singapore's development when we had to give top priority to training for survival and other pragmatic concerns, we are now more prepared to balance this pragmatism with improving our "quality of life".

The trouble, however, lies in the fact that, while apparently wanting to go beyond pragmatism to being concerned for those values that our pragmatism should be seen to be instrumental towards, when we come down to brass tacks to deciding what should be put in or taken out at curriculum construction and the like, and giving a rationale for the inclusion or exclusion, we find ourselves often still in the grip of pragmatism. And our being thus in the grip of pragmatism, whilst not meaning to be exclusively pragmatic at the forefront of consciousness, is all the more dangerous. It shows we may be so thoroughly indoctrinated as to take pragmatism for granted at the unconscious level. These days we warn our young against the so-claimed "subliminal" messages that could be contained beneath pop music and songs. Well, even as adults, we might have succumbed to the subliminal messages reaching us beneath our rational self during the years of intentional pragmatic endeavours. They lurk there, determining our overt styles, behaviours and policies, even as we have begun to shift away from exclusive pragmatism at the front of consciousness.

How else are we to explain the late Dr Tay Eng Soon's saying, as Minister of State for Education, that education should never be valued for its own sake but always be married to jobs and other practical social concerns? Now, this was said in the heyday of compulsory moral education that at Secondary Three and Four culminated in religious studies. It was said when a ministry for culture and the arts had been established, apparently to foster cultural transmission and cultivate the souls of Singaporeans. His ministry had for years been moving a portion of our young "best" from exclusive scientific technical training to areas in the humanities and the arts, apparently to foster human qualities. And, of course, official pronouncements of education ministry philosophy and aims had always paid lip-service to rounded personal development. More, we all knew the late Dr Tay as a fervent Christian of the "prayer and praise" variety. So it could not be that he would consciously maintain that all that mattered to him about human development was meeting people's and

society's pragmatic needs, given his Christian belief in human worth and destiny that goes beyond survival and the good life here and now. So we have to take that saying of Dr Tay's as a slip of the tongue, a bad habit, activated in response to a journalist's pressing questioning, that betrayed an unconsciously acquired tendency that drove against his overtly treasured Christian philosophy of life. And so, also, BG Teo Chee Hian said just recently, at the opening of a ministers of education conference, that education must always be tailored to society's needs, at a time when his ministry was stressing care and counselling, moral education and family values, creativity and thinking. So, when not consciously pronouncing on all-round human development and the quality of life, he, like Dr Tay, slipped and betrayed the same pragmatic drive propelling him beneath. Just the other day, a woman, deprived of natural motherhood and who had adopted a baby, was asked why she opted for adoption. She hesitated, and then, probably feeling it was somehow wrong not to have a pragmatic reason for her decision, said the selfish thing that she had to have someone to look after her when old. Now, I would like to think that, like all normal human mothers, she had only wanted to love and cuddle a baby. But the drive underneath caused her guilt feelings and a sense of shame should she not have a pragmatic reason for wishing and dreaming anything. Cuddling a baby just for itself was a luxury Singaporeans were not supposed to afford, she might have thought! This way of thinking wasn't surprising, after all those years when women were told, first, not to have more than two on pains of having to pay undiscounted maternity charges, and then told later to have more than two if they could so afford, in order to qualify for tax rebates, all this being to enable the country to maintain, at child-bearing, "the formula that works"!

Probably, not all cases of such slips into pragmatism are due to subliminal assimilation through the years of living in our working democracy. Many such cases could, for instance, be due to intentional subscribing to pragmatism, so that even when such subscribers concede that there is more to the quality of life than mere convenience and wealth, they would justify whatever this "more" is in terms, again, of its being conducive to convenience and wealth. The late Dr Tay, and other "Christians in the Cabinet" today, cannot be cases in point here; for unless they are to be accused of gross open inconsistency (which has to be ruled out by their "brilliance"), we cannot take them to be conscious pragmatists at rock bottom -- a values orientation that would clash with Christianity. But with regard to other policy-makers, like Dr Goh, a former education minister whose leadership excellence had previously been demonstrated at the pragmatic ministries of finance and defence, we have good evidence to

say they are really conscious pragmatists at heart, even though they concede that persons should be allowed to develop roundedly to their maximal potential. When making a case for religious studies at secondary school, Dr Goh remarked that should people believe in God, “good luck to them”. He was introducing religion only because he had observed that students of Christian schools had been less prone to being charged with criminal breach of trust; and so, questions of truth and reality aside, religion seemed to be useful to support values deemed to be important by the state. And should we ask him further why such values were important, he would no doubt produce a pragmatic answer once again. Such a reason he gave me when he spoke with me on his concerns for moral education, before he would permit my being recruited into a moral education project at the Ministry of Education a few years ago. He said that it was easy to make money provided I had the intelligence (I felt quite silly hearing that), and that many Singaporeans, after making money, had become snobbish, and if that was allowed to continue, there would be envy and eventually chaos in society, and so moral education was to reduce snobbery and prevent chaos, and thus enhance our chances to survive. Such overt subscribing to pragmatism is probably less dangerous than the subliminally indoctrinated variety, as it is above board and can be debated over, resulting in some at least seeing the light, and acknowledging that, rather than being valued only for survival, morality is among the values that make survival worthwhile. Where people, including Christian parents, school principals and teachers, claim to have idealist visions, and yet fall prey to unconscious pragmatic drives when advising and teaching their wards in the realities of day-to-day practical encounters, the unexamined and deep psychological commitment to pragmatic aims would continue its subterranean infection, undiscussed and unchecked.

So it would seem that, whether overtly subscribing to it or unconsciously indoctrinated, our policy-makers, including those in education, have valued things on an overly exclusive pragmatism. So early streaming of pupils, initially as young as age nine, subsequently age ten, into basically vocationally orientated learning is to prevent “educational wastage”, wastage being conceived as the inability to pass the then primary six, as if educational value lies only in the ability to qualify for selection into secondary courses meant to make pupils economically useful. It never occurred to the planners that those who failed an examination would still have benefited educationally from whatever knowledge and personality traits they had gathered, even if this were of not much use in being certified for jobs. Otherwise, provisions would have been made to ensure that those so young would have the maximal opportunity to learn as best they can the

“academic” subjects (without, say, having to qualify at competitive examinations), even within the basically vocationally orientated courses they are streamed into. The other streams, and the special schools and programmes Dr Goh Keng Swee instituted some years ago, are meant only to provide for varying levels and pace of mastering a curriculum structured towards vocational goals. Schools had for long been streaming pupils into arts, commerce, engineering, medical and science O-levels from as early as secondary three onwards. Even the arts and sciences are deemed to equip pupils for teaching and other civil service appointments, and general commercial administration. The difference between these streams, and the basic ones those deemed incapable of following an academic curriculum are channelled into, is only that they aim at preparation for the higher vocations, but vocations nonetheless. Again, creativity and a “thinking and learning nation” is presently being advocated just so that we can compete successfully in the next century at “knowledge-based industries”. So they really mean to enhance the application of thinking and learning to the arguably new endeavour of creating and managing businesses and saleable products in the new industrial environment. Otherwise, they would have seen that schools, concerned as they have been with the various domains of mankind’s knowledge and awareness of the world, must have been “thinking” all along, since those domains comprise the very subject-matter of human awareness, thought and learning. The thinking and learning campaign would then not be flagged as something innovative, since it would be at most a reemphasis on good schooling and teaching. And the unreliability of teaching morality, religion and values for only pragmatic purposes, just for cultural ballast and social cohesion “so that we might be more like the Japanese and other east Asian tigers”, is now acutely felt, as we suddenly find the tigers have ceased to roar. Are our young to abandon morality and religion, since their proven usefulness is now in doubt?

I have so far left it as obvious why the undue stress on the pragmatic use of knowledge and human development clashes with Christian and, indeed, all true values. We need now to bring out even the obvious, because of the deep-seated indoctrination some of us, like Dr Tay and other Christian politicians, may have succumbed to. First, some general remarks. It is not enough, in order to enhance a rounded human development, merely to ensure a broadened curriculum that includes emphases on the more affective, creative and social aspects of the personality, and other things besides. One should also emphasize the intrinsic worthiness of such human development and the knowledge and understanding involved. For once these qualities of mind and character are valued only instrumentally in terms of their contributions to extrinsic ends such as social material

benefits, the broadened curriculum will still be restricted to only those aspects of a “rounded human development” considered useful for specific social contexts. Even with a sufficiently broadened curriculum, if we do not emphasize its intrinsic value, the worthiness of those qualities as the very things and values that make survival and all other instrumental values worthwhile, will not be appreciated, and reverence due them on this score not cultivated. An instrumental regard for such a curriculum will also demean human life by implying that we are not “sons” but slaves, and deserve an enhanced humanity only in as far as that would oil us to be better fitting cogs in the social machine. Indeed, with an instrumental valuation of it, the more *humane* we make and claim the curriculum to be, the more we impress on our people that *human* beings are worthy only as slaves for extrinsic purposes. So we see how important it is, for parents, teachers and, of course, preachers, not to echo those in political or administrative power when they, consciously or otherwise, become pragmatic again and again, when pressed to justify educational “changes”. But I want to bring out the main challenge to religion and Christianity an overly pragmatic valuation of knowledge poses.

It has been said that religion begins in wonder. I don’t mean the word in the unreflective way many mouth it today when they describe a rare or seemingly rare experience, a worship service, a sermon or just a nice morning, or even their Saviour, as just “wonderful”. I mean it somewhat as it was meant by the author of our beloved John’s Gospel when he began by contemplating in wonder at ultimate issues, and wrote that it had to be that “in the beginning” there was logos. And yet it wouldn’t do for him to leave it at that, since ultimate reality must be the personal God of religious experience. So there was logos and there was God: “the word was with God”. And yet, God would not be ultimate and absolute if somehow He isn’t identical with logos, but has to abide by logos. But yet, again, any being, in order to be and become, must have conformed to the logos of being and becoming, or there would be nothing. So we are faced with a dilemma: just as there surely is logos at the beginning, there is, at the beginning too, for those who have like John been sufficiently initiated into the prophetic experience, the Lord God. And the Lord God, as ultimate and absolute, must also be logos; otherwise, an autonomous logos, to which He must conform, would be ultimate and not He. So it must be that, as it was translated in the *New English Bible*, “what the word was, God was”.

I have, I think not unfairly (given the admitted influence therein of Greek thought), read into the opening sentence of John’s Gospel an extension of a discussion generated by the question in Plato’s *Euthyphro* whether good things are good because the gods will them, or do the gods

will them because they are good. Since the posing of this question, a dilemma had puzzled the theological mind: if God is absolute and creator of all there is (“without Him was not anything made that was made”), He can’t be subjected to the moral law but must be its author. And yet, if the moral law is created only by God’s will that is not subjected to an autonomous logos of good, the good loses its meaning and goodwill becomes indistinguishable from assertion of arbitrary power. Now, we may extend this perception to include considering not just the moral law but logos in general, and then we understand better the issue John’s profound first assertion may be interpreted to be addressing. God cannot exist, apart from conforming to logos, as nothing can be and become that is chaotic and illogical. So, without logos, there can be no God. And yet, God has to be absolute and subjected to nothing other than Himself. So, however mysterious this may seem to puny human minds, somehow both logos and God, while being distinct, must yet be one and the same. As the British philosopher, H.D. Lewis has said in another connexion, what cannot be said of things in the finite realm must somehow be sayable with regard to the infinite, since that is how reality constrains us to believe.

Now, people brought up through a curriculum envisaged in only the instrumental way discussed earlier are likely to be so restricted in vision and content of awareness as never to reach in contemplation the level at which such issues, as that John might have felt constrained to resolve, are personally confronted and appreciated. As such, our church schools would be missing the surest path of successful evangelism for young minds set on learning and education, should they reinforce rather than correct the imbalance of emphasis in educational content, motivation and vision which biased men of affairs unreflectively impose upon them. If we, consciously or not, indoctrinate them from young to regard reality as being only a matter relative to our immediate interests and needs, and our thinking and creativity as being only for generating the knowledge and skills we will take to be the truths significant for ourselves, everything else being “irrelevant” and somewhat false, how are they to even have the motivation to find time and expend energy to ponder on those harder and more abstract but “irrelevant” issues that lie aside that broad and fast path from training to jobs which many find themselves caught in? The path to life is indeed narrow, but we must endeavour that many, especially those who chose to come through our church schools, may yet find it.

The pursuit of knowledge, when the wonder it is bound to evoke is not dampened by a constant lookout for relevance to practicalities that restricts attention to useful and relatively mundane things, would lead on eventually to a pondering, with the author of *John*, over how reality had to

be in the final analysis. The laws of reasoning, and of reasoning about nature, about the morality of interpersonal and other relations, about beauty and taste, etc., surely had to be, for there to be those dimensions of truth and reality at all. There can be no being that does not conform to the logos of being. So in the beginning there must be logos. But can our wondering rest here? Do we not feel constrained to continue contemplating such issues as the following? All the complexities and intricacies of logical relations, and their potentials for the minutest applications within the evolutionary processes of nature, culminating in the development of personal rational consciousness and the various logics of interpersonal understanding and morality, all these having required exceedingly acute and heightened minds to only partially unravel and understand – were they all just there in the beginning, independent of rational consciousness and understanding? And so we need be only awe-stricken in wonder at things in themselves, contemplating and reverencing impersonal logos, without having to come to terms with an ultimate conscious and rational Reality? Some such position even Bertrand Russell, who wrote *Why I Am Not A Christian*, came to when he summed up his critique of pragmatism, in his *History Of Western Philosophy*, by accusing it of “cosmic impiety”. But can we stop with Russell and feel the sublimest awe and reverence, hardly distinguishable from worship, towards only impersonal and blind Reality? There was logos, appreciable only by intelligence; nay, it is the very stuff of intelligent awareness. Reason is the substance of mind, and its workings out in the multifarious sciences, and things beautiful and colourful, need awareness and understanding to acknowledge. Indeed, beauty and colours could not exist without mind. Could it be that all those subsisted in an unconscious reality, and their existence not due to purposive intelligence? So much there was to see and understand. Could it be that it all existed as blind reality through the eons, waiting for only puny minds like ours to become (whose existence might never have been in the natural evolution of things in nature), and to only “see through a glass darkly”? And should there not exist the ultimate Ground and explanation of all there is? For is it credible that things just spontaneously came to be, or that there never was a beginning, reality occurring as an infinite regress of one thing preceding another? And could the ultimate Ground of logos and being, including sentient, conscious, and rational and personal conscious being, be impersonal and non-sentient?

I am not attempting another cosmological proof of God – it is obvious to us, who study the traditional proofs today, that what seems incredible and improbable may yet be possible. But given time and stimulation to ponder over some such issues, our young may yet come to revere and

eventually share, like John, the prophetic experience of a supremely rational and personal God as Lord of all. Reality is a fact that confronts us and we have ultimately to decide not just what it could be but what it is. At an appropriate point in the path of unrestricted enquiry and wondering, we become acutely sensitised, and find ourselves “drawn” into the religious experience of mankind wherein man finds himself in touch with a loving God. If ultimate Reality is personal and mental, then it is not inappropriate that, at an appropriate point of enquiry, man finds Him by way of a leap in sensitivity to catch a glimpse of Him in a sort of sympathetic consciousness between minds. It is somewhat like this. Should I require proof that you in the audience exist as persons and other minds, besides myself, I can always be sceptical, since you all could be well-made robots programmed to behave towards me in seemingly intelligent ways. And yet, if I am appropriately sensitised as I think I am, I should have no doubt I am in touch with you as persons and centres of experience behind your outward appearances. There is some mutual attuning of our minds, and some overlapping of consciousness and experience between us. When our young become, in some such way, sensitised to God, then even more ultimate issues, such as the dilemma John could be trying to resolve, should arise for them, and they should be given even more time and guidance to appreciate and ponder over them, even though they will eventually be humbled, and just accept with John, only seeing “through a glass darkly”, that the Lord of all had also to be Logos, however dark to our understanding this may be. And then, they will have to read John further to examine in what sense and how it came to be that Logos was made flesh and dwelt amongst us, so that they too will be able to behold His glory.

Far from what pragmatists imply, Reality is not for us to make, but we must just bow before Him and acknowledge, without reducing the mystery, what He constrains us to believe and reverence.

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