

FOREWORD

The report in 1976 of a working party of the Religious Education Council on the Agreed Syllabus introduced their view of religious education in the following terms:

In the present situation we see religious education in schools as helping pupils to be informed and concerned about religions and other life-stances rather than attaching them to any particular faith.

This is the view of religious education accepted in this book and all the material here presented must be seen in the light of it.

An appendix to the report of the Religious Education Council states that

much of the material now being produced by believing bodies either assumes that the pupils accept the beliefs described or that the purpose of education is to persuade them to do so. If faith systems could produce authentic information about themselves which, while doing full justice to the depth of their own conviction, assumed an uncommitted spirit of enquiry in the students, the teacher's task, as we have envisaged it, would be generally assisted.

This book is an attempt to produce such authentic information for the use of teachers and students of world faiths. Following the introductory essay we have endeavoured, within the inevitable limitations of space, to present an account of initiation procedures in each faith together with extracts from initiation liturgies, which may be used as source material not always readily accessible elsewhere. The assumption is that this material will be approached with 'an uncommitted spirit of enquiry'.

In what sense, it may be asked, can an enquiry be uncom-

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mitted in spirit when the enquirer is already committed to a certain faith? Evidently what is intended by the phrase is not the abandonment of our own commitment, but a certain openness of mind, a readiness to learn from other faiths and to accept their challenge to our own. That challenge is an inescapable aspect of all dialogue and we suspect that the fear of it is the source of much opposition to the view of religious education herein implied. We submit that there can be no true education where the challenge of new knowledge and insights is avoided.

Since this book (although a non-sectarian publication) will inevitably be used mostly by Christians, it may be helpful to say something about the principal Christian views on relationship with people of other faiths. Owen Thomas, in *Attitudes Towards Other Faiths*, distinguishes as many as eight different attitudes. It would not be within the scope of this Foreword to discuss each of these, but we may draw attention to four basically different attitudes. The first tends to regard all religions as essentially the same, offering the same teaching, containing hidden under the multiplicity of outward forms the same essence or reality, leading by different but equally valid routes to the same goal.

By contrast the second group tends to emphasize the differences between religions, to assert that Christianity is true and others false, that while other religions may have their part to play in the preparation of the divine plan of salvation, its fulfilment will be through the body divinely chosen for this purpose: the Christian church.

Another view which points the difference between the Christian gospel and other religions is that found in Barth and Bonhoeffer. It is a radical Christian critique of organized religions as such and therefore includes a critique of Christianity itself along with other religions as being human inventions opposed to the revelation of the gospel. 'Man uses religion as a way of escaping from God' (John Taylor).

Beyond these groups are a number of others which may be put under the heading 'Christian presence'. These tend to advocate leaving open or postponing theological interpretations and judgements upon other religions, the

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Christian's main responsibility being to *be present* with people of other faiths, sharing both their needs and their aspirations. According to this view the first duty of the Christian is to listen, and only then to do or to speak. This basic priority arises out of respect for the personhood of others and for the faith by which they live. It in no way diminishes the Christian's longing to enable those of other faiths to become aware of the relevance of Jesus Christ for their own tradition.

While the distinctions between these groups are not always as sharp as may appear from this brief summary and there is much overlapping, it will be clear that the approach of this book is most closely allied to the 'Christian presence' viewpoint described in the last paragraph.

What kind of problems may be encountered in the use of the material here presented? Perhaps one of the most obvious pitfalls is for the teacher or student to seek to classify or compare the different faiths on the basis of the information about their initiation rites and the beliefs underlying them which is given here. Let us take an example.

There are some faiths or denominations which tend to emphasize what the candidate for initiation, or his parents and sponsors, or the local congregation, must endeavour to do. In these faiths the initiation rites usually include either questions or promises, or both, concerning what is to be done. Such questions and promises can easily be identified in the reading of these liturgical extracts. There are other faiths which tend to emphasize not so much what the candidate or others will be expected to do as what God is doing sacramentally through the action of the initiation ceremony or, in a more general sense, through his creation and throughout the lives of individuals. In these faiths initiation rites tend to make central expressions of thanksgiving, praise and blessing of God for what he has done for mankind, what he is doing now for the candidate and will continue to do for him throughout his life. The first group are sometimes described as 'humanistic' or 'moralistic', by contrast with those in the second which depend not on human merit or achievement, but on divine grace.

The reader will have no difficulty in classifying some of

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the faiths mentioned here according to these criteria; it can be done almost at a glance and it is precisely here that the danger lies. It can be a fascinating exercise neatly to pigeon-hole world faiths according to these or other criteria and so to have them in some sense within our grasp, but it is one that can be lightly undertaken only by those who are altogether unaware of the astonishing complexity and variety to be found within any great institution or community, a complexity so daunting that it becomes almost impossible to make any general statement about them without important reservations.

If, for example, Sikhism and Methodism were placed in the first category mentioned above on account of their emphasis on what the candidate, or others, must promise to do in contrast with the emphasis of other faiths on the action of God, the student might be astonished to find both groups objecting. He would find the Sikh expatiating upon the significance of Amrit Sanskar (the drinking of the Water of Immortality and the mystic power of the Divine Word which has been breathed into it), and the Methodist forcefully suggesting that he had altogether overlooked the central place given to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

If, on the other hand, Roman Catholics and Jews were placed in the second category on account of their emphasis upon the action of God, and on blessing, praise and thanksgiving, the student would undoubtedly meet strong objections from both Jews and Catholics who would point him to the essential ethical obligations of their faith. And there would be an almost infinite variety of different emphases within each community.

Classification and comparison are therefore to be undertaken only tentatively and with due reservation. But then what use can most profitably be made of the information given in this book? We would suggest that the main purpose of teachers should be to inform, and to do so in such a way as to awaken the sympathetic imagination of their pupils, so that they may gain insight into the faith and practice of their neighbours and a greater understanding of how it feels to belong to a culture different from their own.

A word needs to be said about the space given to initia-

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tion liturgies in the different Christian denominations whereas no similar provision is made for the liturgies of sects within the other major religions. The impression may be given (quite wrongly) that Christianity is the only religious community divided in this way; or it may be objected that the space given to Christianity destroys a proper balance in the book as a whole. In spite of these drawbacks we considered that a treatment of Christian denominations would be appropriate for a book to be used mainly in Britain and North America, whereas to include the liturgies of the sects of other religions would make the book unwieldy and go beyond the normal requirements of teachers.

The essay by the Reverend Howard Marratt, Vice-Principal of the West London Institute of Higher Education and Chairman of the British Council of Churches Education Committee, is based upon an address he gave at a Conference organized by the Standing Conference on Inter-Faith Dialogue in Education held at what was then Borough Road College, Isleworth, in July 1975. In it he considers in the light of the nature of education itself the difference between religious education in the county and voluntary school, and holds that there should be a quite valid difference of intention between them. At the same time he believes that this difference of intention should not find expression, as it so often does, in any essential difference of teaching method. In both county and voluntary school the method must be educationally sound if it is to be successful in communicating a real understanding either of religion as a universal phenomenon or of a particular religion or world-view. Method, therefore, is more significant even than content.

The series of papers on initiation in the different religions or world-views was prepared for circulation to members in advance of the conference and these remain substantially unaltered. Extracts from the initiation liturgies have been collected since the conference with the help of Miss Angela Wood, who very kindly offered to undertake this task. Other acknowledgements have been made elsewhere.

We are aware that the selection we have made from the

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liturgies of initiation rites will not please everyone and that within any given community there will always be variety. Where there has been a recent revision of the liturgy we have preferred to print it in preference to the traditional form even though its use is not yet widespread. The justification for this is that it indicates the way people within a particular community are thinking today, the way things are moving. This seemed to us important in a book for use among teachers and young people. To have used only the traditional forms would have laid us open to the charge of being out of touch with recent developments and would have alienated those with their eyes on the future.

We have indicated the ways in which we hope the information here offered may be of use to teachers. For students of world faiths it will have unique value as the only publication which includes under one cover the actual words of the essential core of the initiation rites of those faiths.

John Prickett