

*The full text of the lecture,
the second in Guildford cathedral's 'Faith in the Public Arena' lecture series,
follows below.*

Study of Religion in schools 'is an invaluable help in the project of building the common good'

**By Archbishop Vincent Nichols
Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster**

Thank you for the invitation to offer this talk, this evening, on the theme of Faith in Education. I look forward to our engagement and, I trust, exploration of some of the points which interest you most. In this talk I would like to explore the implications of its title in two different ways: firstly, can we have faith in education, and if so with understanding of education; and secondly, is there a role for the things of faith in education today. But first of all some remarks about the context of these considerations.

The context for any serious debate on public matters at the moment is that of our collective search for deeper social responsibility in a time of economic stringency. These difficult circumstances are bringing to the fore crucial questions which, to some extent at least, we did not need to face so sharply during years of plenty. But those years are gone.

And in these new circumstances we have to be clearer than ever about our underlying sense of purpose in so many projects, not least among them education.

Is it too simple to say that many issues today revolve around an understanding of what it means to be fully human? What do we strive to achieve? What is most important for our fulfilment? What part does and should society play in this? Does religious belief have a key role, or any role at all? And what is the part to be played by education?

Some commentators, in recent years, have coined the phrase 'economic man' (*homo economicus*) to express one set of values and meaning underlying our existence. This entails the idea that we are all self-centred consumers of all possible goods, seeking the satisfaction of our preferences, however defined. As a model of what describes the richness of our lives and interactions, this may seem a significantly deficient description.

Yet it might be uncomfortably closer to us as an indicator of how we behave. While the facts, or statistics, are clear that there is a lack of correlation, above a certain point, between income and human happiness or contentment, there remains a pervasive assumption within our culture that we are little more than separate individuals who happen to share the same space, who ultimately owe nothing to society and have no necessary bonds with others. In another blunt phrase, this is referred to as the "unencumbered" self. So the suggestion is that the only thing we have in common is the 'market' – or as it was quaintly put: 'Tesco ergo sum'.

I cannot believe that any of us present here this evening actually accept this is a satisfactory account of what it is to be human. Such an account leads to a notion of education centred on, and judged by, the task of preparing young people to be effective and productive in the market places of today and tomorrow. Emphasis is given to predominant links with industry and future economic wellbeing. Now of course, these are proper objectives for education.

But they are no more sufficient than is that account of what it is to be human. That is not a true humanism.

There is not time to elaborate, from scratch as it were, a fuller picture of our true humanity. But I believe it is unfolded for us in our Christian tradition, conveying, as it does, the truth of our humanity. The fuller picture is there, in that tradition, because it is the truth of who we are. We may confidently build on that inheritance.

The Christian understanding of human person is that we are each created in the image and likeness of God. Thus the root of our dignity, of our purpose, lies deep within us, within that abiding presence of God of which St Augustine spoke so clearly when he said: 'For behold you were within me, and I outside... You were with me and I was not with you' (Confessions Bk 10)

Each of us, then, is endowed with this capacity to go beyond the immediate, beyond the world of sense perception: we have a capacity for self-transcendence.

In other words, we are each in the process of becoming, existentially, the person who, by nature, - or essentially - we already are. By our nature we are open to the 'beyond'. Distinctively, we reach out for more. We seek love. We seek truth. We hold them as qualities to be attained. In many ways, this orientation to truth and love is key: each person has a God given capacity to search for the truth and to live by it in love. Similarly the gift of freedom allows us to exercise our conscience in both discerning and living the truth. Human life in fact makes no sense without this desire to seek what is true and to live in freedom.

But what is truth? In his book, launched just yesterday, *Jesus of Nazareth - Part Two* Benedict XVI explains that although the scholastic definition of truth (conformity between the intellect and reality) is correct, if a person's intellect reflects a thing as it is in itself, then he has found truth, 'but only a small fragment of reality - not truth in all its grandeur.'

However, Aquinas, more fully understood, teaches that truth, properly and firstly, is in God's intellect, so that God is truth itself, the sovereign and first truth. When we see this, and understand that, in contrast, truth is ours only properly and derivatively, then we are led closer to what Jesus, the Teacher, means when he says he came into the world to bear witness to the truth.

So the Pope writes: 'The world is "true" to the extent that it reflects God: the creative logic, the eternal reason that brought it to birth. And it becomes more and more true the closer it draws to God. Man becomes true, when he grows in God's likeness. Then he attains his proper nature. God is the reality that gives being and intelligibility... Bearing witness to the truth means making creation intelligible and its truth accessible from God's perspective...'

In this way we come to see that in mathematics and in the human genetic code, for example, we are recognising the language of God.

In contrast, an education concerned with merely “functional truth” denies itself the whole language.

Pope Benedict again: ‘The functional truth about man has been discovered. But the truth about man himself – who he is, where he comes from, what he should do, what is right, what is wrong – this unfortunately cannot be read in the same way. Hand in hand with growing knowledge of functional truth there seems to be an increasing blindness towards “truth” itself –towards the question of our real identity and purpose.’

So true education must help us to see that our identity and dignity as free beings is founded in our relationship to God. Moreover, recognising this enables us to affirm that we are all members of a single human family, each with a unique identity and a unique calling. We are, therefore, inherently social beings, whose identity is in part constituted by the relationships we have with others.

In fact, none of us can find our true fulfilment entirely apart from other people.

It is not just that we are born into relationships of dependence, or even that without our relationships we could not grow or develop. It is that only through our relationships – of love, friendship, the enlargement of our social ties - that we can be fulfilled. To be fully human is to be more than an individual - it is to be a person-in-relationship, self- transcendent, creative and emergent. These are the very bonds that enable us to understand and fulfil our freedom to be ourselves.

Now this gives us a very different purpose for education. Now we are talking about the development of the whole person, understood in this ‘self-transcending’ manner, reaching out from within a complex of relationships, building more relationships of every sort, and seeking fulfilment precisely in depth of relationship and community and conscious of God.

The deepest purpose of our efforts, then, is not self-promotion but service of this complex web of interdependent persons. Our efforts are at the service of others, at the service of their and our fulfilment. It is for this that education, especially in those very formative years up to the early twenties, exists.

This is a simple but rather radical claim. Education has a subsidiary function – it should be at the service of the common good of all, first of all those around us with whom we share our lives but also then with a wider perspective which includes ultimately the whole human family.

This is what Catholic social teaching insists upon: the flourishing of all, respecting their dignity, is this overall purpose. Each person matters and no one is to be excluded. There is a job to be done, and we each have a part to play in doing it.

The language used by Catholic teaching to express this conviction is that education is there to serve the common good. Yet this language of the 'common good' is used so widely, with such different meanings, that its distinctive meaning is not easy to capture. But there is a useful image from mathematics. In a utilitarian calculus, maximising the common good would be like an addition sum. In Catholic social teaching it is more like multiplication. You will understand that, in a multiplication, if there is a zero, then the total is also and always zero. So too if, in society's efforts at progress, anyone's good is completely excluded - a zero- then the total is also zero and the true common good cannot be realised. The emphasis on the human dignity of all immediately takes us towards a particular concern for the weakest and to ask how well their needs are being met.

If this is the overall view, very clumsily put, which we take of education, then how does it shape our view of its essential core. How are we to treat each person who takes part in the processes of education today?

In recent years there has been a growth in interest in education as character formation. Much research has been carried out into the values and virtues upheld by young people from the youngest age of 3 years up to more complex research into the views of 16-19 year olds. Resources exist, cast in non-religious terms, to enhance this aspect of education and the publications continue to emerge, both in terms of research and class-room resources.

From a Christian point of view, of course, the effort to avoid religious language and put aside the valuable contributions of such a rich and fruitful tradition is not necessary. Fortunately we are free of such inhibitions.

While this emphasis on character education is a very contemporary approach, it is not new. Recently I had drawn to my attention, an address given to National Association of Headmistresses in 1932. It was given by Mother Mary Angela, then headmistress of the Ursuline Convent School in Forest Gate.

She spoke about the central task of education being 'the training of character' and how it was threatened by the growing size of schools and an increasingly uniform approach. She highlighted how, in response, another philosophy of education had emerged, centred on a 'doctrine of self-expression'. This sounds rather familiar. So it is worth following Mother Mary's comments a little further.

She expressed doubt about this new philosophy because, as she put it, 'I cannot believe that the method of self-expression, carried to its logical conclusion, provides any real safeguard to an individuality valuable to the individual himself or to society. For, at least in its more advanced forms, self-expression ignores the difference between repression of impulses and control of impulses. Secondly by placing the good or convenience of others as the only limit of its action, it ignores objective standards of right and wrong and so must lead, if not to unrestricted egoism, at best to a weak humanitarianism.

Moreover it ignores the practical fact that the young child soon exhausts not merely that which it has worth expressing, but also that which it is able to express at all.'

Now there is a lot there for us to get our teeth into. But the good headmistress goes on: 'The deepest fact, which is often ignored, when character training is approached from the angle of self-expression, is the distinction between individuality and personality.'

In making and elaborating on this distinction, back in 1932, she touches on so many contemporary themes: the use of the term individual often amounts to the psycho-physical aspects of each person: body temperament, instinct and consequent reactions to experience and to the world around us. 'Person', on the other hand, is a being striving for freedom from domination by 'the mechanisms of human nature', capable of pure thought and free-will, created and sustained by God with a definite vocation and purpose.

So Mother Mary concludes these remarks by saying, 'Our task then, in the training of character is to find means of developing, not so much individuality, which may lead to an eventual dominance of idiosyncrasy or egoism, but personality by the integration of character round the spiritual core of the person.' She sums up her view with the saying: 'Be yourself, but make that self just what God wants it to be.'

Mother Mary comes across as such an attractive figure, a true educationalist, in whom one could have great faith. She recognises the teenage years as a period of 'plasticity, the girl awakening to a clearer self-consciousness and a keener self-criticism, growing in a sense of personal responsibility, in discernment of higher values and in depth of spiritual aspiration'. The teenager therefore needs 'understanding and judicious sympathy.' But she insists that 'a lax standard is fatal to growth and freedom of her personality just as is an over rigid code of rules backed by sanctions of reward and punishment.'

And then the words I like best.

She sums up the ethos of a school in one sentence: 'Courage is born in an atmosphere of trust; sincerity in that of truth, purity in beauty and gentleness in love.'

At this point I would like to introduce another theme, increasingly of interest to educationalists and indeed, even somewhat surprisingly, in wider circles in society. Put at its most simple, and flowing directly from those comments of Mother Mary Angela, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of the role and cultivation of virtue.

For some this call is echoed in the hopes of the Prime Minister of wanting to create in our society what he has called 'a culture of greater social responsibility.' The need for that is clear, although I do not think it is well-expressed in the phrase – or slogan – 'the big society.'

Yet we all recognise how important it is that trust is re-established or strengthened at many levels in society, whether in government, in banking and the financial sector,

or simply between generations. As Pope Benedict said in his teaching document 'Caritas in Veritate': 'development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.' (71)

To act in this way requires more than not breaking rules. It demands the cultivation of moral character, the development of habits of behaviour which reflect a real respect for others and a desire to do good. This is what we would hope for from the efforts of all of us in education. What we are seeking, then, is the practice of virtue, for virtue helps to shape us as persons because they strengthen who we are by nature. They empower the process of our becoming.

By virtue we act well not because of external constraint but because it has become natural for us to do so. The cardinal virtues – justice, prudence, courage and temperance, to give them their traditional names – as the hinges on which the good life turns - form us as moral agents,

so that we do what is right and honourable for no other reason than it is right and honourable, irrespective of rewards and regardless of what we are legally bound to do. Virtuous actions spring from a sense of one's own dignity and that of others and from self-respect as a citizen. It is doing good even when nobody is looking. (Cf Choosing the Common Good – Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2010)

May I add another point, and it is more immediate than others.

Much of what I have said this evening is drawn from the tradition of Christian teaching and life with which many of us are familiar. Similar conclusions can be arrived at by the pathways opened up in other major religions. Having an appreciation of these treasure stores of wisdom and revelation is an invaluable help in the project of building the common good and of self-fulfilment. Without this appreciation we are condemned to be endlessly starting again and, no doubt, repeating mistakes and pursuing blind alleys.

The gift of faith, that trusting, loving response to the revelation of God, is of the greatest importance because it puts us into the realm of a clear and conscious relationship with God, the source of all life and happiness, and into the context of a community of faith which, for all its shortcomings, will support, encourage, stimulate and guide us.

Therefore it seems particularly inopportune of the Government to be thinking of effectively relegating the serious study of these matters of religious belief in the life of the schools of this country by excluding RE and RS from the core of humanities studies in the proposed E-Baccalaureate system of exams and assessment. The place of Religious Studies in community schools will surely suffer despite its growing popularity since in the E-Bac measure, pupils' achievement in GCSE RS will count for naught. Religious Studies surely can be seen to be at the heart of the study of humanities. Indeed in Catholic schools, RE is at the 'heart of the curriculum'.

It can claim to be the humanity, par excellence. In an increasingly confusing world, Religious Studies gives young people perhaps their only opportunity to engage seriously not only with the most profound

philosophical questions concerning human existence and the nature of reality, but also with the most fundamental ethical dilemmas of our day. Religious Studies is a demanding subject requiring knowledge and skills in history, the critical use of texts, anthropology, ethics, philosophy and theology. Its deliberate omission from any measure seeking to ensure that pupils receive a genuinely broad education is indefensible. Indeed, illiteracy in matters of religion can serve only as a severe handicap in the efforts to find greater social cohesion and to promote the common good.

But I wish to conclude on a note of faith, hope and love.

In this fine Cathedral this evening we are sheltered by a building constructed not just to contain the life of worship but also to be itself an expression of that worship. Here we recognize that it is Christ Jesus who opens for us, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, the truth about ourselves and the unfathomable truth of God. And that unfathomable truth of God is of God who is a dynamic communion of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each of whose unique identity is wholly constituted by their being in relation to the other. Furthermore, the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity reveals what it is for us to be human. From Christ Jesus, who is wholly from the Father and for him, and therefore wholly for us too, we learn that our human personhood is a way of being entirely from and for the other.

Faith in Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, assures us that God has definitively and irrevocably chosen to be for us, and that we have been set free to be wholly for God and for one another.

And this faith, in response to the revelation of Love itself, gives rise to our sure and certain hope that our becoming will reach its end, its fulfilment. Our humanity is perfected precisely by sharing in the divinity of Christ, by sharing in his being anointed with the Father's love. It is such faith and hope that inspires within us a self-sacrificing love – a love bringing healing to our fractured world, even here and now.

To conclude: building on the natural virtues, there is a place for faith in education, along with Love and Hope. When this is understood, then education serves the process whereby every person can move on the pathway of self-transcendence. This pathway whilst perfecting our human nature, wonderfully surpasses it. For these supernatural virtues – faith, hope and love - are nothing less than God making himself fully known, educating us, forming us, drawing us out beyond self and into the very heart of divine life, where, to use the words of Mother Mary, we become the self God wants each one of us to be.