

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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## CONTENTS

**FOREWORD** Editor 2

### ARTICLES

WHY JOHNNY CAN'T PRAY  
Michael R. Weed 3

"WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?"  
Douglas L. Gragg 13

SKILLS, CREDENTIALS, OR FAITHFULNESS?  
Allan J. McNicol 19

READING THE BIBLE THROUGH LIFE  
Wendell Willis 29

FROM SCRIPTURE TO SHARING  
Gary Holloway 39

### BOOK REVIEWS

*Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*  
by William Kilpatrick Dean F. Smith 49

*A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching  
Office in the Church* by Richard R. Osmer  
Allan J. McNicol 52

**CONTRIBUTORS** 54

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## FOREWORD

The church, founded upon and guided by the biblical story, is the place where that story becomes concrete reality.

In order to maintain its identity and to remain faithful to its calling, the church must continue to draw its wisdom and insight from the Bible. Above all, the church must be a place where the Christian message is proclaimed, the Bible is taught, and believers are enabled and encouraged to live faithful lives.

The church is also the place where biblical faith is passed on to future generations. Today, this task is complicated by challenges at every hand. Powerful forces pull upon the church from the outside world. Countless distractions divide our efforts and weaken our resolve. Quick and easy solutions expend our energies and waste our resources. This issue of *Christian Studies* poses a serious question: If the church can not, or will not, who will make us wise and keep us safe for our journey?

Special acknowledgment is due Mrs. Denise James for her expertise and unflinching cheerfulness in assisting in the preparation of *Christian Studies*.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*



## Why Johnny Can't Pray

*Michael R. Weed*

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

Hosea 4:6

Hosea 4:1-10 announces Israel's failure and Yahweh's consequent judgment. Today, this text offers both a timely reminder and a sobering warning for the church's leaders--elders, preachers, teachers. It is a reminder of the crucial importance of passing on basic biblical faith and knowledge. It is also a warning of the devastating effects wrought by the betrayal of the task of passing on the faith.

Hosea (4:1) indicts Israel for lack of faithfulness, lack of loyalty, and lack of knowledge. Israel is also indicted for widespread moral blight. Verses 2 and 3 list a number of crimes that are widely practiced among the people.

The heart of the prophetic indictment, however, does not fall on the nation or the people in general. The faithlessness of the people is recognized as a direct result of a deeper problem. The main object of God's displeasure is those primarily responsible for Israel's welfare--the religious leaders. These are indicted for having failed the people by failing to perform their duties. For Hosea, the corruption of the people is rooted in and reflective of the failure of the priesthood.

The priests are condemned because they have not taught those in their care; they have failed to inculcate knowledge of God's works and his will in his people. They have betrayed the trust

Yahweh has placed in them:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me (6a).

We are not given the complete background of what led to this situation. Scholars tell us Hosea is addressing a time of prosperity in the reign of Jereboam II. The text suggests that Israel's ever-present struggle with Baalism played a role in the crisis. The text may also suggest that the priesthood is no longer seen primarily as a way of serving Yahweh but merely as a way of making a living, a career. The priests, perhaps for turning the sacrifices into a mechanical mockery of their true nature and meaning, are accused of "feeding on the sin of the people" (vs. 8).

Whatever the full explanation--prosperity, careerism, idolatry--the failure of Israel's religious leaders promoted a national disaster. Those responsible for maintaining and passing on the faith had betrayed God's trust. With eloquent brevity, the prophet announces that the people are destroyed "for lack of knowledge."

Again, these words stand as a timely reminder and sobering warning to all bearing responsibility for passing on the faith. While circumstances change over the centuries, the task of passing on the knowledge and practice of the faith remains constant for the people of God.

### A Cry of the Heart

A recent article by Nancy Yos vividly reminds us that the risk of failing or betraying this task is as great today as it was Hosea's time.<sup>1</sup> Describing herself as having "almost twelve years of formal Catholic education at my back and seven-and-a-half years of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes, four years of religion classes at a Catholic high school," Yos remembers coloring,

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<sup>1</sup>Nancy W. Yos, "Teach Me: A Catholic *Cri de Coeur*," *First Things*, Number 22 (April, 1992) 23-28.

filmstrips, and a textbook called *Deciding and Relating*. Nowhere in this process was she taught the fundamentals of her religion. Yos states:

If the fundamentals had ever been given to us, I think we could have absorbed them. But they were not given. . . . How frantically my teachers worked to fill the time with anything except plain information! . . . On behalf of their church, my teachers cultivated such innocence as would have made any harassed pagan emperor smile, and sleep soundly in his bed. . . . In my own parish's weekly bulletin a priest writes of the need to pass on the Catholic faith to young people, and yet he persists in organizing pizza parties, ski trips, and weekend excursions to amusement parks. To my knowledge this man has never gathered ten adolescents into a classroom to speak to them about their religion.<sup>2</sup>

And then the poignant "cry of the heart":

No teacher ever stood up in any classroom of mine and made any positive statement beginning with the words "This is so." I would have liked to learn something, anything.<sup>3</sup>

Yos expresses concern for modern youth who, ill-served by their teachers and ignorant of their faith, must survive in a confusing and secular world. Had she known her Bible better, she could have concluded with Hosea's words: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

Unfortunately, the phenomenon of religious leaders and officials failing to teach the knowledge and practice of their faith is confined neither to the time of Jereboam II nor to the modern American Catholic church. Yos's story, with minor changes, accurately describes the experience of many non-Catholics.

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<sup>2</sup>Yos, 25.

<sup>3</sup>Yos, 25.

There are obviously many reasons, ranging from character flaws to adverse circumstances, why religious leaders fail in their responsibility to nurture and pass on the faith. Perhaps most tragic and far-reaching, however, are those unintentional ways in which the teaching capacity of the church is weakened and undermined. In the remaining comments I want to examine one major source the modern church's failure to pass on knowledge and practice of the faith, viz., modern education theory. Modern education theory not only has seriously damaged secular education; it has also been annexed by many well-meaning Christians entrusted with the task of religious education.

### Three Assumptions of Modern Education Theory

Hannah Arendt, writing nearly forty years ago, brought her considerable intellectual powers to focus on the then emerging crisis in American education. Arendt especially criticized American educators for an "uncritical fascination" with and "slavish acceptance" of a complex of modern education theories originating middle Europe.<sup>4</sup> The adoption of these theories, enthusiastically promoted as "progressive education," "completely overthrew . . . all tradition and all established methods of teaching and learning."<sup>5</sup>

Behind the ruinous measures widely implemented, Arendt identified three closely interrelated assumptions which have become part of the taken-for-granted world of modern American education theory. First is the assumption that there exists a child's world which must be protected from the world of adults. Indeed, the

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<sup>4</sup>Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1961, originally 1954). "What in Europe has remained an experiment, . . . in America about twenty-five years ago completely overthrew . . . all traditions and all the established methods of teaching and learning" (178).

<sup>5</sup>Arendt, 178.

child must be emancipated from the adult world of tradition, authority, control, and discipline.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, Arendt argues, this approach has placed children in a disastrous state. When put into practice, it has meant that children are not "emancipated." Rather, they are

. . . handed over to the tyranny of their group, against which, because of its numerical superiority, they cannot rebel, with which, because they are children, they cannot reason, and out of which they cannot flee to any other world . . . .<sup>7</sup>

The child, "free" from authority, tradition, and discipline, is defenseless before an even more terrifying and truly tyrannical force than the individual "authoritarian" teacher ever posed, viz., the tyranny of child-majority.<sup>8</sup> The result has been conformism or juvenile delinquency, and bizarre combinations of the two.<sup>9</sup>

The second underlying assumption, influenced by modern psychology and pragmatism, is that teacher training needs to focus on learning theory rather than on the material taught. The effects of this have been far-reaching. Among other things, it has resulted in "a most serious neglect of the training of teachers in their own subjects."<sup>10</sup> In effect, students are increasingly left to their own resources. It has also undermined the most legitimate source of the teacher's authority, which is his or her mastery of a body of knowledge. The teacher now seeks a classroom identity in roles such as "facilitator," "convener," or "co-discoverer."

The third basic assumption is that a learner can know and understand only what he or she has done or experienced directly.

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<sup>6</sup>Arendt, 181.

<sup>7</sup>Arendt, 181.

<sup>8</sup>Arendt, 181.

<sup>9</sup>Arendt, 182.

<sup>10</sup>Arendt, 182.

This has meant the substitution of "doing" for "learning." Teachers were led to fear "passing on dead knowledge," seeking instead to demonstrate skills through which knowledge is produced. The result has been the

transformation of institutes for learning into vocational institutions which have been as successful in teaching how to drive a car or how to use a typewriter or, even more important for the "art" of living, how to get along with other people and to be popular, as they have been unable to make the children acquire the normal prerequisites of a standard curriculum.<sup>11</sup>

For Arendt, the substitution of doing for learning also led to discarding the distinction between "play" and "work"--in favor of the former.<sup>12</sup> Play was romanticized as the natural state of the child and the truest form of learning:

. . . learning in the old sense, by forcing a child into an attitude of passivity, compelled him to give up his own playful initiative.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the natural maturation process of development from childhood to adulthood, and the crucial relationships between children and grown-ups, have been seriously damaged. The tragic result is that this procedure consciously attempts to keep the older child, as far as possible, at the infant level. The very thing that should prepare the child for the world of adults, the gradually acquired habit of work and of not-playing, is done away with in favor of the autonomy of the world of childhood.<sup>14</sup>

For Arendt, these three assumptions have thrust aside common sense and human reason. They have given rise to a

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<sup>11</sup>Arendt, 183.

<sup>12</sup>Arendt, 183.

<sup>13</sup>Arendt, 183.

<sup>14</sup>Arendt, 184.

preoccupation with method over content. In short, they have had a devastating impact on modern mass education. They directly underlie the failing performance standards and confusion seen in American schools. They have abandoned teachers, armed with little more than slogans and cliches, to an environment denuded of conditions necessary for education to occur, viz., self-discipline and respect for authority and tradition.

Symptomatic of the bankruptcy of the whole approach are the teaching profession's infatuation with therapeutic jargon, and incessant quest for "meaningful experiences" or "learning experiences." Henry Fairlie vividly characterizes the tragedy of many modern classrooms:

School teachers . . . let their little victims play at what they will, and . . . applaud (it) as their self-actualization. From cradle to grave, life is to be avoided by therapies . . . .<sup>15</sup>

Fairlie continues,

We should think hard why the phrase "learning experience" has been found necessary. . . . When we say "I learned this today," we mean something is learned. When we say "I learned this today," there is a measure by which to test its accuracy and value. . . . But when we say "that was a great learning experience I had today," we mean only a rather vague and superficial response in ourselves, in which what happened to us is more important than anything else.<sup>16</sup>

Such "education" has in effect disinherited students and created a class of sophisticated barbarians, free from the restraint, guidance,

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<sup>15</sup>Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic, 1978) 115.

<sup>16</sup>Fairlie, 115.

and wisdom of authoritative pasts and thus trapped in an ever-expanding and egocentric "radical contemporaneity."<sup>17</sup>

### Why Johnny Can't Pray

For several decades, seminaries and divinity schools have been developing programs for preparing ministers in various "fields" such as religious education, counseling, youth ministry, and missions. Countless specialists have been given some level of expertise in matters such as education theory, adolescent psychology, and cross-cultural communication. While this appears progressive, a high price is being paid by the church. Programs for specialized ministries have watered down the curriculum to make room for specialty courses.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, knowledge of the Bible and of the Christian faith provide little or no integrative framework for ordering and guiding most specializations in "ministry." Thus we regularly see methods, techniques, and insights uncritically annexed from various social sciences and other disciplines and enthusiastically introduced into the life of the church. Unfortunately, few recognize that many of these resources have underlying assumptions that are antithetical to the Christian faith and promote long-term consequences that are simply disastrous. In spite of good intentions (however naive),

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<sup>17</sup>Philip Rieff, *Fellow Teachers: Of Culture and Its Second Death* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1985) 39.

<sup>18</sup>See James D. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). "Even in our best seminaries it is assumed that a person who is to direct an educational program does not need the same thorough training in Bible, church history, and systematic theology that is considered necessary for preachers and pastors. . . . There are seminaries where the disparity of standards between the two departments is so great that Biblical and theological textbooks used for religious education students would not be recognized as adequate in the theological department. . . . The distinction between the two was greatly sharpened by the tendency in the first half of this century for religious education, in its zeal for educational thoroughness, to follow a line of development that was separating it ever more widely not only from other theological disciplines but also from the historical continuity of the church's life" (87-88).

these ministries and their various programs have become major arteries through which the toxins of modernity are invading the church.

Particularly tragic has been the impact of this development upon the church's ability to provide basic instruction in the Bible and the fundamentals of the Christian faith. While Sunday schools and Bible classes provide an unending array of discussion groups, sharing sessions, and "meaningful experiences," biblical illiteracy and ignorance of basic Christian beliefs are reaching epidemic proportion among youth and adults. Not surprisingly, Christians who don't know the Ten Commandments, the 23rd Psalm, the Shema, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, or the Fruit of the Spirit have difficulty living faithful lives.

Johnny can't pray (and knows little Bible and less about the Christian faith) for the same reasons he can't read (and knows little about history and geography). Like the priests and leaders of Hosea's time, many of us entrusted with passing on the faith are betraying that task. Prosperity, careerism, and idolatry apparently played prominent roles in Israel's betrayal; in our time, an additional factor is at work. We are betraying our task for many of the same reasons modern education has betrayed its task, namely, preoccupation with methods and techniques which are firmly rooted in the prevailing myths of the post-Christian age.

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