

Christian Schools and their Impact on Society

It is a privilege to speak here today about how the Christian school's role in society can be strengthened. It is also a challenge. That is in the first place because Christian education is rather differently embedded across Europe. In parts of former communist countries, Christian schools can form a very small part of the total educational system; in countries like the Netherlands some two-thirds of primary education is – at least formally – Christian in nature. And even if we restrict the focus to robustly Christian schools, it is important to note their complete financing by the state (NL), making their financial position more secure, and at the same time the sacrifice (and perhaps the commitment) of parents less. And it is important to note that the task of the school rather heavily depends on its context – not only nationally but perhaps more importantly locally. Some Christian schools are able to function in a highly supportive (local) context; others much less. The chances for schools to make a difference in (local) society is considerably greater in places where they are already part of the moral and civic furniture.

Talking about how to enhance the impact of Christian schools on the surrounding society is also a challenge because in a general sense many teachers and administrators of Christian schools already know the way. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6). This is the way to impact society, one child at a time. The school, along with the parents, have a responsibility to instruct their children in the Scriptures, to cultivate Christ-centered piety and Christian character formation, and to integrate faith with learning. And of course at the same time it must offer outstanding education that is academically rigorous. Some 99% of the children at American Catholic schools graduate and nearly all of them go onto university, much higher statistics than the surrounding school system. In parts of the world, such as the Middle East, Christian schools are praised for their quality, and many Muslims see Christians for that reason as "the good example." Cultivating Christians and training scholars – what other ways can there be for Christian schools to impact society?

I do, though, want to focus upon a specific opportunity for Christian schools in this day and age, and that on what Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI once remarked on the calling of Christians in Europe, in which he thought that "Christians should look upon themselves as such a creative minority and help Europe espouse once again the best of its heritage, thereby being at the service of humankind at large." His concept of a "creative minority" has generated discussion, but I think it would be valuable to apply it to upcoming task of Christian schools in Europe, because I do think this is a vital responsibility for the future.

Let me begin with the latter word first, the word "minority." That means that the Christian school works with the assumption that it does not represent the majority of the population, or that its task is to minister to a society that is Christian, even to defend it or maintain it. That stance is even now not an automatic one; a majority of Europeans still think of themselves as Christian, and in some parts of Europe there is a deal left of a Christian culture – that is, where Christian institutions enjoy considerable influence and where Christian moral or spiritual norms are consciously upheld. Small Protestant churches have generally had an easier time of thinking of Christianity as a minority religion, of thinking of themselves as Gideon's band, but I think it is telling that the current head of the largest church in Europe – which can claim the formal adherence of vast majorities in some European countries – now also thinks of Christians as being a minority. There are perhaps 75-80 million active Christians in Europe, perhaps 20% of the population, a minority, if not a negligible one.

But being a minority is more than a matter of numbers, it is a mindset. And it is not necessarily a benevolent mindset, particularly if a minority feels threatened or beleaguered. It can mean – in American parlance – a circling of the wagons, as settlers did to protect themselves against the attacks of American Indians. Being a minority can ~~be~~ mean being defensive, alert to the enemies from outside – and thus also from the inside. Outsiders are more a threat than an opportunity. And even if Christian schools do not suffer from mindset their notion of somehow being set apart can generate a mentality that keeps them standoffish from the rest of the population. My teenage daughter is now spending a semester at an American Christian high school, but it is her impression that what others

say about the Christian school is true – it is less welcoming to strangers than the public schools, where there is more diversity and more openness.

Not all Christian schools are like this, of course. And there is biblical basis for Christians setting themselves apart from the world. It is legitimate for Christian parents to want to protect their children from some of the less inspiring aspects of the general culture, and it is necessary for children to be prepared in a strongly Christian setting before they go out into the world. But that of course is the crucial issue – with which mentality does the Christian minority prepare its children for the future? Moral and spiritual formation designed to reduce the dangers and the temptations of the world are certainly called for; an overly sunny view of the world does no one any good. But a more engaged stance with the rest of society, in which the minority offers a compelling vision of the Good Life, is also part of the job ahead. A minority yes, a conscious minority that cherishes its distinctive and higher calling to be disciples of Christ, and at the same time one that is able to have a good conversation with the surrounding world.

That brings us to the “creative” part of Ratzinger’s formulation. Creativity is not necessarily a strong characteristic of conservative Christians, particularly not those who are primarily playing a defensive game. And “imagination” – the very stuff of creativity – is not necessarily the first word that such Christians think of either. Imagination is seen as not a way of knowing, a false competitor to revelation, an opponent of the true and the real, as exemplified in St. Augustine, who rejected theatre as the telling of falsehood. And indeed C.S. Lewis reflected a good deal on unhealthy forms of imagination, in which lusts and lower desires can lead us down the wrong path. But as many of you know, Lewis was an important champion of the Christian imagination, seeing it as important check on a dull rationality that he saw in modernity. And he saw the imagination, with its emotive elements, as a way of “seeing” the really real, the deeper realities behind the appearances. Imagination makes it easier to visualize for ourselves a good future, and a less good one, so in this sense it is an important part of any Christian education.

Lewis helps us also think about the central place of literature in developing the Christian imagination. As Peter Schakel writes, “The imaginativeness of stories enables children to form and internalize “sentiments,” those complex combinations of feelings and opinions which provide a basis for action or judgment. They are helped to learn and live out “magnanimity,” the nobleness of mind and generosity that enable one to overlook injury and rise above meanness.” In other words, moral are taught not through moralizing, but through the moral imagination.

N.T. Wright, in addressing college students, once said that God “wants us to go to the place where the world is in pain, and to imagine the love of God at that place, and to express that imagination in our art, our music, our silence, our poetry, our architecture.” Imagining the love of God, and attempting to respond in ways that is faithful to our calling as Christians.

Wright may be addressing older students, and he may be focused on the arts, with their powerful connections to the imagination. Perhaps it is reason to see art, music, poetry, and literature as deeply foundational to cultivating the Christian moral imagination of children – maybe to an extent now not emulated in Christian schools. But the point can be made more broadly, to younger persons and also beyond the arts. The aim of Christian school is to help enliven children to “see” the wondrous world that God has made, to marvel in it, and to imagine new interactions with it. And those interactions have, at least as Christians see it, a deep moral and spiritual meaning. Frederick Buechner once described calling as the place where your deepest longings meet the world’s deepest needs. Christian education is about helping children prepare for this calling by making them alert to the world of possibilities open to followers of Jesus. And giving shape to new possibilities is important. Augustine found it entirely appropriate that the Israelites took Egyptian gold with them on the Exodus. That gold had value, just as Augustine felt that pagan neo-Platonism had value insofar as it put him on the way to Christian faith. So too Christians can benefit from all kinds of gifts developed outside the church. But it requires an active moral imagination to turn that gold into something more beautiful.

In this way Christian schools can cultivate a “creative minority.” But will all this change society? Will the impact of Christian schools be greater? I cannot, of course, say, and I am sceptical of Christian plans to transform the world. But I do think it is vitally important that Christian schools, as distinctive minority communities, continue to struggle mightily to give their students a moral imagination that will propel them into the service of God and their fellow creatures.