

# Intuition and Christian Education in Postmodernity

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*This paper explores the place of intuition in our coming to know and illustrates it with reference to a range of forms and kinds of knowledge, e.g. mathematics and logic, science, art, ethics, aesthetics, personal knowledge, tacit knowledge, seeing patterns, etc. The links between the idea of knowing intuitively and the biblical emphasis on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit are explored with particular reference to Reformed epistemology's themes of 'properly basic' belief in God and of self-authenticating divine revelation. The paper then explores the possibility of seeing teaching as being more a matter of drawing learners' attention to features of a work of art or of helping them to see things differently than leading them through a logical reasoning process from shared assumptions. These possibilities are discussed with reference to the contemporary decline of influence of the modernist rationalist project. Christian education, it is suggested, is more a matter of telling the Big Story or showing the Big Picture than the kind of rational process we often take it to be. Seeing Christian education in these terms may be more biblical and more relevant to the contemporary world than our traditional ways of seeing it.*

### Introduction

Ideally, an abstract of a paper is something that is written after the paper itself. The difficulty with one written a long time in advance of the paper – as the one before you was – is that what a person ends up writing in the paper may be something other than a faithful representation of the initial thoughts and intentions! This is the case with this paper but I shall seek to cover most of the ground indicated in the abstract although not in the same order or with quite the same emphases as I set forth there.

'Intuition and Christian Education in Postmodernity'. I begin with (i) a brief description of an imaginary classroom scene suggested by Parker J Palmer, (ii) a quotation from the same writer and (iii) a word-picture of where we find ourselves as Christian educators at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

'Intuition and Christian Education ...'. In his book 'The Courage to Teach', Palmer invites us to watch a good teacher sitting on the floor with a group of five-year-olds, reading a story about an elephant. He writes this: 'Viewed through the eyes of those children, it is almost possible to see that elephant in the middle of the circle!' (Palmer, 1998, p. 118). Just watch what is happening for a moment. The teacher is not in the centre, nor are the children. They are all gathered around the elephant. You can see the elephant, you can feel it and hear it, you can almost smell it! Drawing on their experiences of seeing and hearing elephants, whether in a zoo or in a documentary or film story, all are taken up with the reality of the elephant. There is a reality with which they – teacher and children alike - are in touch, a reality mediated by their experiences and memories. And their imaginations are working with this to enable them to indwell the story as it takes shape. Teacher and children live the story, the story of the elephant.

'Intuition and Christian Education ...'. The quotation comes from another book by Parker Palmer, an earlier book, 'To Know as We are Known', where he writes this: 'Ultimately, I do not master truth but truth masters me' (Palmer, 1983, p. 59). I shall return to this classroom scene and to this quotation later.

'Intuition and Christian Education in Postmodernity'. We are all on the roadway of western life, culture and education. At one point on the roadway, there is a bridge, a long and wide bridge, and down below it there is a river. The river is not clearly visible below. Some say that it is deep and wide, that its name is 'Paradigm Shift', and that it is aptly so named. It is the border between two regions, they say, the region we have been going through for about three hundred years of our journey, the region known as Modernity, and on the other side is a region that we as yet know little about. They say that whatever it is, it is very different from Modernity. There is no going back, they say, we are moving into Postmodernity and are probably already into it. Some are very excited about this. They look forward eagerly to life in this new land where, to borrow a title from a book published in the UK, 'tomorrow is another country'. Others are filled with foreboding. They say that the land is dominated by a fearsome dark mountain which occasionally shows itself through the mist, Mount Relativism, and if you attempt to climb it, you fall over the edge into a chasm with nothing to hold onto and you find yourself whirling downwards into darkness and meaninglessness. On the other hand, there are others who say this river is not so important at all. It is but a stream and not at all worthy of the name Paradigm Shift. What we have on the other side is really not very different from that which we have left. It is more of the same, the same land of Modernity. It is just a matter of taking the journey a bit further into it with a few changes of scenery but basically the same place.

### Whither Christian education in postmodernity?

As Christians and, in particular, as Christian educators, we may have very different feelings about it all, indeed quite confused feelings. Many of us feel the river is indeed deep and wide and worthy of its prestigious name. We have moved into a new country or we are moving into it. Some of us who see it like this are filled with fear and foreboding. We warn of the dangers of Mount Relativism and of the dread chasm that lies on the other side of it. We fear that the students we teach may be already in this new country and speaking a new language or, at least, a new dialect that we do not understand very well. On the other hand, others of us find this new land a bracing prospect and we share something of the excitement of those who say 'tomorrow ... another country'. We welcome the exposure of the emperors of Modernity for what they were, totally without any clothes in spite of all their pretences to being the best-dressed rulers in all of history. We welcome the fall of the huge statues of these emperors, these idols for that is what they really were, these idols of rationalism, scientism, positivism and others. They now lie in some city park like those of Lenin and Stalin in some post-communist land, no longer occupying the place of dominance they once had. We are admittedly wary of the coming to power of new emperors bringing with them new idols but we are generally more positive about the prospects, including the prospects for Christian influence in this new country.

I would like to suggest that, assuming that something significant is indeed happening within our culture, whether or not we welcome it, we do not have the option of moving out of this brave new world. Our calling is to be in the world but not of it. Our calling in Christian education is to be transforming influences rather than conforming nonentities, to relate the Gospel of God in a way that can be heard and seen and that meets people where they are in this postmodern world. We cannot take a plane and fly far away and, as the psalmist says, 'be at rest' (Psalm 55:6). It is into this world that He sends us, indeed, it is into this world that He *calls* us for that is where He came to be. We ought not to attempt to fly away. Nor should we seek to travel through it in a way that is cut off from all about us, like travelling in one of the SUVs that seem to be so popular over here - only with the glass darkened so that we cannot see out rather than that others cannot see in. That option is not open to us any more than it was to the Man of Calvary.

I want to suggest further that, as we seek for a 'third way', another way to think and live within this postmodern world so as to relate to it and to avoid the ills of both the modern and the postmodern whilst embracing what may be good about them, there is something of which we should make much more than we are accustomed to doing. Indeed, we have good Christian grounds for doing so, a good biblical basis for it. This is the neglected matter of intuition.

### **Kinds of intuition**

Mention in philosophical discussion of intuition in general - and of intuition in the context of faith in particular - is likely to be met by a 'knee-jerk' reaction that kicks it out of court immediately. Intuition is a rather ambiguous term so I shall now move into analytical mode for a few minutes - especially as some of those writers I will refer to belong fairly firmly in the era when logical analysis held complete sway. The gradient of this walk may therefore become more steep for a few minutes but we shall soon move on to more level ground again!

Anthony Quinton distinguishes three senses of the word (Quinton, 1973, pp. 119 ff.) First, there is what he terms 'vernacular intuition'. This is the ability to form correct judgements in circumstances where the kind of evidence usually required to justify them is not available. This is what ordinary language usage takes intuition to be as, for example, when someone predicts impending disasters without having or being able to point to any evidence for their prediction. Such intuition entails the truth of that which is intuited so that 'intuit' belongs to the same class of words as 'know' and 'remember'.

A second sense of the word refers to what Quinton calls 'psychological intuition' and this covers particular beliefs formed by a particular person and accepted by him as justified where such acceptance is not based on inference from other beliefs that he holds. These beliefs may or may not be true and may or may not be justified although the subject takes them to be justified.

The third sense is that of Quinton's 'logically intuitive beliefs' and he writes of them:

"The terminal intuitive beliefs that are needed to bring the regress of justification to a stop need not be strictly self-evident in the sense that they somehow justify themselves. All that is required is that they should not owe their justification to other beliefs. ... (L)ogically intuitive beliefs ... do not need support from others (but) are not necessarily excluded from such support." (Quinton, 1973, pp. 119-120)

On the matter of support, Quinton distinguishes between 'essential' and 'accidental' support. A logically intuitive belief may have accidental support but it does not require it for justification. A belief that is not logically intuitive does require support to be justified and this support is therefore essential. He suggests the example of a case where, in poor light conditions, a book is asserted to have a red cover not because the cover can be seen but because it is known to belong to a particular person, all of whose books have red covers. The belief that the book is red is logically intuitive to the extent that it does not need the support of the general statement that all this person's books are red and can be seen to be red under the right light conditions. In this case, the support of the general statement is accidental (Quinton, 1973, p. 121). Logically intuitive beliefs will normally be psychologically intuitive as well but they do not have to be so because they may have (accidental) support that is recognised as such by the subject. On the other hand, we may accept beliefs

without reasons or evidence and only later find that they have essential support - so psychologically intuitive beliefs need not be logically intuitive.

Quinton's 'logically intuitive' corresponds more or less to 'properly basic' in the work in the eighties on 'Reformed epistemology' of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (see, for example, Plantinga & Wolterstorff, eds, 1983). His 'psychologically intuitive' corresponds to 'basic' in that work.

The language here in Quinton and in Plantinga and Wolterstorff is that of foundationalism, albeit a rather more moderate form than that of Rene Descartes who sought for absolute certainty and indubitability in his foundations (and thought he had found it in his 'Cogito ergo sum' or the more emphatic 'Cogito ergo ego sum' – 'I think therefore I am'). It is the language of those who see the structure of a person's beliefs and knowledge in terms of a pyramid rather than a raft (see Sosa, 1980), in terms of foundations rather than coherence. I think this language can be translated fairly easily into that of core beliefs rather than basic beliefs if thinking about how beliefs fit together in a whole is the way you think about them.

By the way, talking of foundations, I do find some of our talk of these to be somewhat unreal and removed from life's experiences. We talk as if what everybody does is first to decide on their foundation beliefs and then to build upon these foundations the whole structure of their beliefs. Is that how it was or is for you? I somehow doubt it. Is it not rather the case that we are archaeologists rather than architects or builders? We find ourselves with many beliefs that more or less fit together in a structure and then we 'dig down' to find the beliefs on which the structure is based and we probably rearrange some things as a result (see Burrell, 1979). The process of belief formation is often, I suggest, more intuitive than logical.

I would add that it is perhaps more difficult than it seems from many accounts of worldview beliefs to make explicit our own most fundamental or central beliefs. They are about *us* as whole people in God's world, about where we view *from* rather than what we view. So where do we view from when we view where we view from?! Robert K. Martin puts it like this:

"The more fundamental a belief, the harder it is to bring it to explicit awareness, and even more difficult – to critically reflect upon it." (Martin, 1998, p. 253)

What I am suggesting here is that intuition works more at what the great Hungarian chemist-turned-philosopher, Michael Polanyi, termed the 'tacit dimension' (see Polanyi, 1966/1983).

### **Cross-curricular intuition**

Polanyi said that all our knowing is 'personal knowledge' because 'into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known' and this is 'no imperfection but a vital component' of all our knowing (Polanyi, 1958/1962, p. viii). In this process of coming to know reality above us, around us and within us, intuition is a mysterious but necessary faculty that enables us to move spontaneously from the multiplicity of particulars in our experience of reality to a discernment of the whole, of overall patterns and coherences. It enables us to move beyond understanding the meanings of the words in the sentence to seeing the point of uttering it at a particular time in a particular context.

This is true of our knowing of all the different aspects or dimensions of reality. Mathematics may seem at first sight to be simply a matter of proceeding logically from the basic axioms and definitions which are taken to be self-evident. But intuition (and its complementary faculty, that of imagination) operate all along the way. How otherwise do we come to see that a proof is indeed a proof? How do we discern the beauty of some pieces of mathematical working over other more awkward and untidy pieces? How do we see that certain conclusions are valid and others are not? Similar observations could be made about logic.

Much of Polanyi's work was, of course, focussed on the sciences. Here he distinguished between the 'anticipatory intuition' of a problem through which scientists feel their way towards a solution and the 'final intuition' of the discovery of the solution and the seeing that it makes sense, seeing things in a new light (Polanyi, 1969, p. 202).

In art and music, the discernment of beauty and harmony in the whole is at a level beyond that of seeing particular details and yet it does not happen apart from awareness of the details. In ethics, too, knowing what is good is a matter of a particular kind of awareness and not simply the conscious logical application of rules or criteria. Beauty and goodness, like truth, are there to be seen rather than to be defined.

And do not all three - truth, beauty and goodness - come together in our spiritual awareness, our knowledge of God or, lest that sound too objectivist, our knowing God? Knowing a person cannot be reduced to knowing facts about the person for we may know a lot of facts about a person without ever having met that person. However, it would be strange if we claimed to know somebody without knowing anything whatever about him. And we do not all need to know the same facts about a person to validly claim that we know her. What is needed is some form of direct acquaintance that entitles us to claim we know the person as a whole person and that integrates all the particulars into that whole knowledge which is more than and different from the sum of its parts. Not that we cannot come to know the person better or more fully – we always can. Personal knowledge can be true without being comprehensive or exhaustive for

these are impossible. The problem with some of our relationships – even our relationship with the Lord Himself – can be that we come to think we know all that there is to know of that other person.

Plantinga and Wolterstorff in their work on Reformed epistemology claimed that properly basic belief in God can be grounded in immediate awareness of Him and that divine revelation can be 'self-authenticating' in that it is grounded in our awareness of God speaking to us. This goes beyond understanding the meanings of particular statements in scripture, for example, to grasping the point of it all, to understanding that God is personally addressing us. What this suggests is a way of thinking about the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that is different from a mainly logical process of considering reasons and evidence.

D. Z. Phillips, the Welsh philosopher of religion influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Simone Weil, writes of education in matters of faith as being like 'elucidation of a thing of beauty' (Phillips, 1970, p. 163). This suggests that our Christian education may be, at least in part, more like drawing attention to features of a work of art so that our students may come to see the 'Big Picture' for themselves than one of leading them through a process of rational argumentation.

Of course, in this, we should not forget the importance of hearing when all is talk of seeing. The Hebrew emphasis is on hearing ('Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one', Deuteronomy 6:4) while, arguably, the Greek view of knowing is more focussed on seeing. Perhaps this goes along with the Hebrew emphasis on knowing being relational and involving the whole person as against the detached spectator view of knowing as knowing an object that is separate from us (see Oppewal, 1985/1997).

### **Back to postmodernity ... and elephants!**

Where does this leave us in our search for a Christian alternative to both modernist education and postmodernist education? Are there here some pointers to a third way that incorporates the genuine insights of modern and postmodern in a biblical approach that relates to the world in which we live and move?

I suggest that it is something more truly wholistic than a purely logical integration of statements of our faith into the content of the different subjects of the curriculum. It is not simply about changing minds but changing people. It is about learning better to relate to reality above us, around us and within us. It is about making the elephant the centre of the classroom. It is about being mastered by that which we seek to know. It is a matter of knowing as loving rather than knowing as controlling or mastering.

Polanyi talks of knowing that is active and passionate, oriented to reality and deeply concerned to know what is real and true. Indwelling is a central process for him. We do not simply study reality as detached spectators – we come to indwell that which we seek to know (see Martin, 1998, p223 ff.).

This calls for humility on the part of both teacher and students (or teacher-student and students-teachers) as we together seek to know God's world better and more deeply and wholly. One of the problems with talk of intuition is that it can too easily be taken to be infallible but as a faculty of fallen and finite human beings, it is no more so than any of our knowing faculties. This means that our realism is critical rather than naïve, aware that we can ever improve upon our understandings and interpretations. We know only 'in part' (I Corinthians 13:12)!

It does not call for an abandonment of logical analysis but rather for a recognition that it is not the only thing that matters or the whole or even the most important part of the knowing process. Indwelling and critical reflection belong together in Polanyi's approach. Robert Martin puts it like this: 'Indwelling forms a gestalt; it gives a sense of the whole. Analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the parts of a gestalt and isolates them from their joint meaning in the whole. ...Critical thought is the process of bringing to explicit awareness that which we come to know by virtue of the contact we have made with reality.' (Martin, 1998, pp. 228-229).

This also means that our teaching should be of the whole person rather than simply a development of the logical and analytical. We should use metaphors and stories more than we often do (see Smith & Shortt, 2002). After all the Master Teacher Himself did so! When we tell the story, we don't have to kill it immediately by explaining *the* meaning without leaving people time to take it in and think about it. Our teaching should perhaps be more rhetorical (another word that is nearly always used with negative connotations but perhaps we need to discover a right use of rhetoric) and more allusive.

Above all, let's sit together on the floor with our students, become as little children with them and seek along with them to come face to face with God's world, to know it and love it, to indwell His reality, to come to see the whole and not only the particulars. As the song says, 'what a wonderful world' and we should add 'what a wonderful God'!

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