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## Weeding the garden

The last two chapters have dwelt largely on the positive possibilities of relating the Bible to education through the medium of metaphor. What about the downside? If we move away from propositionally expressed doctrine into the slippery world of image and metaphor, will we find educational responses to the Bible becoming overly subjective? If fertile metaphors evoke an open-ended, expanding set of meanings, are there any boundaries? If metaphors can mean different things to different people, if botanical imagery can mean one thing to Comenius and another thing to Rousseau, are there any limits to the meanings which we can spin out of an image drawn from Scripture? Even though it could be retorted here that a focus on propositions has hardly prevented disagreements over interpretation or a variety of subjective responses, will an emphasis on metaphor not simply make matters worse? When we examine the relationships between propositions, there are at least familiar standards of logical coherence and

consistency which can be applied – how can we judge the biblical faithfulness of metaphorical reflection?

### **What is an *unbiblical* metaphor?**

Our exploration in the last chapter of what might responsibly be understood as a ‘biblical’ educational metaphor helps to point us towards some answers to these questions. There we emphasised that what we have in mind is not simply a random borrowing of imagery from Scripture, but rather a process in which the metaphor both informs educational thinking and remains embedded in a theological context. That context sets broad limits to its interpretation.

Biblically allusive metaphors presume some familiarity on the recipient’s part with their wider Scriptural background. Comenius assumes that we are familiar with the Genesis narrative, which should condition how we understand his garden metaphors. Palmer, perhaps feeling able to assume less on the part of his readers, feels it necessary to explain the specific idea of love which he has in mind by discussing 1 Corinthians chapter 13. A biblical metaphor, in the sense developed here, draws its background biblical texts into the process of its interpretation.

Another relevant part of the theological context is provided by wider networks of imagery. Within Scripture, for instance, the image of God as a shepherd could, if taken in isolation, be taken to imply that God is shabby, poor, unwashed and worthy of little respect. These aspects of the image are excluded partly by the immediate context of the image and partly by a wider pattern of imagery in which God is also referred to as a lord and a king. The wider network of images helps to condition the interpretation of any single image. Here again, responsibly tracing the biblical sense of an image or metaphor will involve attending to wider contexts of meaning.

If the way in which an image is developed in educational thinking leads to tensions with this wider biblical context, then we can conclude that the image has not been entirely successful in relating the Bible to education. We will consider an example in more detail.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Charles A. Curran developed an approach to education which he called “Counseling-learning”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Curran, 1972, 1976.

It was based on the client-centred approach to counselling, which was developed by figures such as Carl Rogers under the broad umbrella of humanistic psychology. This movement in psychology emphasised the individual's existential experience and inherent potential for personal growth if freed from outside control.<sup>2</sup> Curran's pedagogy echoed these emphases. He demanded that the teacher withdraw from the central position of authority in the classroom and allow learners to direct the pace and content of lessons. The teacher was to provide warm and carefully uncritical support when invited to do so by the students.<sup>3</sup>

The interesting point here is that Curran explicitly claimed that his approach to education was consistent with a Judeo-Christian view of the person.<sup>4</sup> In fact he went further than this and introduced terms drawn from Christian theology directly into his theory of learning, describing learning as an "incarnate-redemptive process". He did not intend these terms to be taken straightforwardly in their theological sense,<sup>5</sup> but argued that there is a "parallel or correspondence" between religious realities and psychological processes. This parallel, he argued, means that the imagery of incarnation, redemption, rebirth and dying to self can be illuminating in relation to educational psychology.<sup>6</sup>

Curran used a whole network of theological metaphors to expound his theory of learning. For present purposes we will home in on his use of the term "incarnation". He used the term in two related senses.

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. May, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> For the details see Curran, 1972, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Curran saw his proposals as rooted in the "Judeo-Greco-Christian tradition of the view of man and of the human encounter as something engaging him in his whole, existent and corporeal person" (Curran, 1972:49).

<sup>5</sup> Oller (Oller & Richard-Amato, 1983) criticised Curran for suggesting that the teacher could replace God as the one who redeems; Curran's rhetoric can at times invite that impression, but he also noted that the sense in which he was using the language of incarnation and redemption was distinct from, and not intended to replace, theological usage (see e.g. Curran, 1969:192, and the discussion in Stevick, 1990:77-96).

<sup>6</sup> Curran, 1969:175.

### **‘Incarnation’ for the learner**

On the one hand, he wrote of the need for the *learner* to become ‘incarnate’. He wanted to resist the tendency in Western thought to detach the intellect from the body and the emotions. In its place he wanted to develop a view of learning which addressed the ‘whole person’. Following Jean-Paul Sartre, he suggested that the basic human condition is that of wanting to be God, resisting our sense of finitude and grasping for power over others and our environment.<sup>7</sup> In our desire to forget our finitude, Curran argued, we tend to distance ourselves from the concrete emotional and bodily aspects of personhood and take refuge in intellectualised abstraction. We cling to the security of what we know, favouring abstract concepts that seem to take us beyond our bodily limitations. As a consequence, we become resistant to the new learning that comes through full-bodied immersion in communal life with others – it is easier to play God when one is alone. Thus, Curran argued, we become divided against ourselves (intellect versus feelings) and confined within ourselves (closed to others). If this state of affairs is to be overcome, if our whole person is to become engaged in learning, then we need to learn to accept ourselves. We need to become one with our body and feelings and leave the world of detached abstraction for the world of warm and open engagement. This is one sense in which Curran uses the language of incarnation – the detached ‘I’ must die to its ambitions and become ‘incarnate’, that is, must become one with the concrete, feeling self.<sup>8</sup>

### **‘Incarnation’ for the teacher**

The second sense of ‘incarnation’ for Curran had to do with the relationship between the *teacher* and the group of learners. To the beginning learner, the teacher is god-like – an omniscient judge who has absolute command of the material being studied and who rules sovereignly over what goes on in the classroom. This presents temptations to both teacher and learners. The teacher may be tempted to live out his or her desire to be God by maintaining distance from the learners

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<sup>7</sup> Sartre, 1957:63; Curran, 1972:64-67.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Curran, 1972:19, 67, 98.

and dominating them, filling the learning space with his or her own authoritative words. The learners, due to their own desire to be God, may under such circumstances become resistant to learning from the teacher and alienated from the learning process. The teacher, Curran argues, must take the initiative in bringing redemption into the situation. He or she must overcome this enmity by leaving his or her God-like position. The teacher must die to self by giving up the position of dominance and joining the learners in their vulnerable state. The teacher becomes a fellow member of the learning group, and Curran saw this as implying that he or she must yield control over the curriculum to the learners, adopt a supportive role, and accept the criticisms of learners without resistance or self-defence. This change in role on the teacher's part is the second sense which Curran gives to the term 'incarnation'.<sup>9</sup>

### **'Incarnation' and its problems**

Curran's use of incarnational language is interesting and suggestive. It is not hard to see how the image of incarnation, used metaphorically, could awaken associations of self-sacrificial humility for the Christian teacher. After all, the New Testament urges that "your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing."<sup>10</sup> We saw in chapter 7 that this passage may well be intended as a contrast to Adam's grasping after equality with God. Instead of such grasping it invites us to the same humility that Christ showed in the incarnation. It could lead our imaginations further still, as Curran saw, to a parallel between the dignifying of human flesh through Christ's incarnation and the teacher raising the dignity of the learners by taking a humble position in their midst. There is, then, a positive Christian rationale behind Curran's use of the image of incarnation.

It is, however, not without its difficulties. The passage from Philippians just quoted notes how Jesus "made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant" and "humbled himself and became

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Curran, 1972:31.

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2:6-7.

obedient to death". The emphasis here is on the depth of Christ's descent from the glory that was his by right, the marvel of his condescension in taking on the weakness of human nature. If we look closely at Curran's use of the term 'incarnation' we find a mismatch at this point.

Take the first meaning of 'incarnation'. Curran is here trying to describe a move away from an overly intellectualised and disembodied view of the self. The 'disincarnate' state is one of intellectual abstraction, emotional detachment and self-enclosed isolation from others. It is a deficient state. Becoming 'incarnate' means becoming *more* real, *more* concrete, *more* open and involved. But in the biblical story which Curran is evoking, this picture does not fit. To make it fit we would need to view God prior to the incarnation as distant, cold and uninvolved, a far cry from the passionately engaged God depicted in the pages of the Old Testament. We would also need to view the incarnation as a matter of this detached, abstract, self-enclosed God becoming *more real* by taking on flesh. This is not the sense conveyed by the verses we considered from Philippians chapter 2. 'Incarnation' for Curran does involve a certain kind of humbling of oneself, and a rejection of grasping after equality with God, but ultimately it is seen as a process of becoming *more whole*, and this does not echo well the biblical emphasis on a deeply involved God condescending out of mercy to take on the *less* substantial frailty of flesh.<sup>11</sup>

There are similar difficulties with Curran's second usage. If what is emphasised here is the teacher's humility and care for the learners, and his or her refusal to grasp after potential privilege in order to take up a position of vulnerable service, then this second usage does have some biblical substance. It may authentically communicate a call to have the same attitude as Christ, taking up the role of one who serves. However, Curran's use of the term also suggests that the teacher is moving away from a detached, self-preoccupied and insensitive detachment to a caring involvement with the learning group. Again, the move is from a deficient state to a more authentic one. This is at odds with the biblical

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<sup>11</sup> This submerged implication, which is present when the imagery of 'incarnation' is used (as it commonly is – see e.g. Harris, 1987:8-9) to describe a full-bodied living out of the truth, as opposed to abstract intellectual affirmation, is the reason for our hesitation over the language of 'incarnation' in chapter 3.

picture of a God already deeply attuned to his people's suffering, reaching out in mercy to walk among them. It also runs deeply counter to the biblical idea that human nature had nothing to recommend it as a vehicle for redemption (Christ made himself "nothing", "a slave"), suggesting instead that our flesh somehow made God more authentic. Humility is in danger of inverting into pride.

Now our interest here is not primarily in the details of Curran's educational theory, but rather in how we can judge his use of biblical imagery to be faithful or unfaithful to the Bible.<sup>12</sup> The attempt made here at evaluating some of Curran's ideas does involve assessing the beliefs implicit in his metaphors and comparing them with a biblical worldview. But since his metaphors are drawn directly from the Bible, it also involves attempting to discern whether they function to faithfully evoke the contours of the biblical context from which they were drawn. This is the reverse side of what we described earlier. If successful, a metaphor drawn from Scripture can evoke scriptural themes and stories, drawing the thought-world of the Bible into the heart of educational reflection. If unsuccessful, then tensions emerge between the imagery as used in the biblical context and the sense of things evoked by its new educational use. Metaphors can draw the Bible into interaction with education in ways which provoke a wide range of fresh perceptions, but this does not mean that there are no limits, that anything goes, or that we do not need to proceed with considerable care.

### **Metaphor and intimacy**

The interpretation of systematically employed metaphors is, then, to a significant degree contextually bound, and it is possible to make judgements concerning the faithfulness of an educational metaphor to the biblical context. At the same time, the subjective nature of our response to metaphor should not be regarded only as a potential weakness or danger. It can also be a significant strength.

A number of students of metaphor have pointed out that successful metaphors draw us into the world which they evoke. The passage cited in chapter 9, in which John Wilson sought to separate coldly objective prose language from what he saw as a more dangerous poetic

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Curran's theory, see Smith, 1997b.

language that also engages our imaginations and emotions, shows a clear awareness of this process even as it resists it. Metaphors, like stories, can speak to more parts of our being than our reasoning powers.

Ted Cohen argues that metaphors function to establish a peculiar kind of intimacy between speaker and hearer.<sup>13</sup> When an interesting metaphor is used, the hearer must penetrate beyond the surface meaning of the words and work at gaining a sense of the image being conveyed and what it implies, what perceptions it is meant to invoke. The metaphor is a kind of invitation. It does not wear its meaning on its sleeve, and so it invites the hearer to begin to explore its possible meanings, to try it on as a lens for viewing the matter under discussion. It also invites the hearer to bring his or her personal experience into play in order to gain a sense of what the metaphor is getting at. The hearer is drawn into a kind of collaboration with the speaker for communication to take place.

Cohen is well aware that this intimacy does not necessarily imply friendliness. The image could, for instance, be used in order to make a cruel joke at the hearer's expense. If the metaphor is successful, the hearer will nevertheless still have been drawn into the speaker's way of seeing. As Wayne Booth puts it:

The speaker has performed a task by yoking what the hearer had not yoked before, and the hearer simply cannot resist joining him; they thus perform an identical dance step, and the metaphor accomplished at least part of its work even if the hearer then draws back and says 'I shouldn't have allowed that!'

As we respond to a fertile metaphor we find that our imagination, our experience and our emotions have been engaged, we have been induced to make certain connections between our experiences and to see the world in a certain way. The effects of such seeing can be harder to throw off than an argument offered to us purely in terms of propositions for our intellectual consideration. If we adopt this way of seeing things, making it our own, it can work its way into the ways in which we shape the world around us, affecting our hopes, fears, plans and actions.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, 1979.

All of this suggests that the subjective appeal of metaphors can be part of their strength – it is not hard to see here part of the reason why Psalm 23 might hold a less intimate place in the life of the church if it had begun with a propositional statement about God’s providence instead of with the line “The Lord is my shepherd”. Our response to the metaphoricity of Scripture can, if we dwell upon its metaphors and allow ourselves to be drawn into their world, forge an intimate connection between our lives (not merely our intellects) and the Bible.

It is interesting to note that this addresses what some have come to see as a weakness of linking the Bible to education through worldview statements. In chapter 8 we noted Harry Fernhout’s argument that a more propositional approach can be overly cognitive in emphasis. What Christian education should be concerned with, he argues, is a whole life orientation, and not merely a particular way of *thinking* about the world. Thinking Christianly may be essential, but we are eminently capable of thinking one thing and living another. Perhaps metaphor can help to draw further dimensions of our selves (and the selves of our learners) into the process of interacting with Scripture.

This point should not be pressed too far. The process of transforming the way we see and act is not inevitable. Some metaphors remain little more than striking, one-off images, interesting for a moment but soon submerged in the flow of experience. The most original metaphors have a remarkable capacity for being transformed from dramatic overture to clichéd ditty or barely perceived elevator music in a short space of time. Even if we find a metaphor more fertile and begin to explore its broader potential for shaping our seeing, it is only as it becomes systematically embedded in our ways of seeing and living that it will become a “metaphor we live by”.<sup>14</sup> Coming up with an interesting new image will avail little if it is not accompanied by changed patterns of practice. Exploring the possibilities of biblical metaphor will thus make demands on our living, and not just our imagination, returning us to the concerns of chapter 3.

With these qualifications, however, enough has been said here to suggest how metaphor can play a constructive role in drawing educational reflection into interaction with the Bible. This continues to move us beyond the scope of the objections surveyed in chapter 2, which by and large assumed that relationships between propositions

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<sup>14</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:54-55.

or principles and educational practice were the only kinds of relationship in view. It is a key function of metaphor to enable learning by connecting what would otherwise remain disparate parts of our experience; it is this that makes metaphor a significant strand in the relationship between the Bible and education.