

# Alive to the World

A REVIEW ARTICLE

## Dogmas, liberalism and moral education

Moral education, especially in schools, deserves sensitive attention in a world divided along the fault lines of religious, irreligious and cultural diversity. Choosing *how* to make personal moral decisions requires an ability that is acquired, not implanted by nature. Helping individuals to make moral decisions is arguably a catechetical priority in Catholic education, but in schools, confessional or secular, this is not always considered to be a priority in an already crowded curriculum. A belief that human beings are free to do what they want to do within broadly utilitarian limits is already well established and virtually undisputed in a secular society. Liberalism tends to replace traditional religious beliefs about the source of ultimate and decisive moral authority with a utilitarian ethic based upon an unchallenged advocacy of autonomy and the virtues of relativism. The notion that there are moral absolutes to be acknowledged in the regulation of human affairs, as taught by the Catholic Church, is denied with dogmatic vehemence by advocates of moral relativism. Questions about the importance of the family, human relationships, or human rights and responsibilities, are thus approached in the spirit of non-interference. Learning to discriminate (a dangerous word) between the utility, the validity, not to mention the truth, of different responses to moral questions is discouraged if not forbidden in schools. 'Multiculturalism', once commended because it was said to promote the 'enrichment of culture' through an empathetic study of religious and cultural diversity, has begun to trivialise the religious and cultural traditions it was intended to affirm and celebrate.

Without guidance in their formative years, many people find themselves unable to think clearly about the important moral decisions they have to make, incapable of reflecting thoughtfully about the issues rather than merely disinclined to do so. The sceptical critic and the curious inquirer alike are thus deprived of a coherent account of the essential guidance offered, not least by the Church. It is tempting for teachers to employ an ostensibly 'non-indoctrinatory' method in the classroom in order to promote openness, objectivity, fairness and balance. This approach, paradoxically, curtails the education of the critical faculty. Were students to be left without guidance and advocacy in the rest of the educational curriculum 'to choose for themselves', it would rightly be judged to be an abdication of the teacher's responsibility. A *laissez faire* approach in moral education shows a failure of nerve. The resulting face-off between those who favour a faith oriented approach to morality and those who favour a secular approach to ethics without reference to religion is of little use in developing the critical faculty. A 'hands off' approach is often justified on the grounds that 'indoctrination' is to be avoided, but in educational terms the resulting neglect is culpable. Fear of being accused of indoctrination makes teachers cautious about any approach to moral questions that might be prescriptive and didactic, yet an ostensibly 'neutral' description of what is acceptable to different groups of people can, and often does, conceal its own dogmatic ideological agenda.

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### Making use of Guidance

Apart from the home itself, synagogues, churches, mosques, other centres of religious affiliation can and do provide guidance about moral issues. The ethos of a confessional school might be expected to convey, at least implicitly, a coherent approach to moral values, but a more explicit programme is also necessary. The Catholic Church already provides clear guidance, but it is frequently the case that Catholics are not persuaded to read, let alone use, the available resources. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for example, is a rich source of authoritative teaching. In December 1995 The Pontifical Council for the Family produced *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, which emphasises the role



played by parents as the first educators of their children, especially in matters of sexuality. Those who do not know or appreciate the Church's teaching about marriage and the unique nature of the sexual act within marriage cannot share this teaching with their children, who have to find their way in an environment outside the influence of the home that is so hostile to the Church. Parents, teachers and pastors are rightly concerned when moves to make sex education in schools compulsory from an early age are accompanied by teaching material that fails to do justice to religious beliefs and susceptibilities.

A new source of practical assistance for parents teachers and pastors concerned about moral education is *Alive to the World: A Catholic Approach to PSHCE and Sex & Relationship Education*, now being published by Gracewing. It is a carefully constructed programme commended by the late Alfonso, Cardinal Lopez Trujillo, sometime President of the Pontifical Council for the Family. In the course of his commendation he wrote:

*'Sex education is often given without the correct outlook and necessary prudence, and as a result it transmits views which are questionable and ends up by defending the trivialisation of sexuality, which is a gift from God. ...It should be linked to values such as friendship, fidelity, companionship, honesty and respect for nature. It should be education for love, in the noblest sense, with an authentic responsibility which goes deep into the truth of what it is to be a human being.'*

### A New Resource: Alive to the World

*Alive to the World* is a useful additional source of material, for non-Catholics as well as Catholics, parents as well as teachers, religious believers as well as unbelievers, which considers moral education systematically and progressively. The material, in the form of narratives, stories, activities and teachers' guides, is specifically designed and co-ordinated for use in the successive stages of a child's physical, intellectual and spiritual development. The programme is designed to appeal to the widest possible number of readers. Specific references to religious or non-religious beliefs or belief systems are conspicuous by their absence. *Alive to the World* was originally conceived and produced in Spanish by Christine Vollmer, a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Pontifical Academy for Life. She wanted to reach children everywhere, irrespective of their religious and cultural backgrounds. Her deliberate attempt to concentrate attention on the common interest is not intended to marginalise religion, but to place to one side for the moment that which is potentially contentious. This is a risky venture. Critics may consider that the attempt to present a clearly stated 'Catholic approach' implicitly rather than explicitly is disingenuous, but her efforts to engage those of other faiths and of none in the use of the programme in the common interest is to be applauded. Her programme was designed for use in Latin America; but after testing opinion in Britain, the English text of this series of books and teacher's guides is now being designed by a team of contributors, aided by trials of the teaching material in English schools.

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The website gives a full description of the programme and includes sample pages from the books. The widespread use of computer technology and access to the Internet tend to make any published programme speedily out of date and even redundant. If the books are to be used among sixth formers, the designers will need to plan for students already well versed in the use of computer technology and no longer content with printed material, however colourful and attractively presented. The English version is intended to be used as a continuing course of work with pupils in schools between the ages of 6-18. So far, the books for Years 4-8 (ages 8-13) are available. For Years 9-13 (ages 13-18) the text of the books is being revised to make use of the latest research, iPod and Internet technology. These titles are expected to be ready in the next two years. Plans

for use among the youngest children are still in the minds of the authors. The publishers describe their project as 'a complete values education programme 'which covers all the (British) Government's targets for Personal, Social Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE) for ages 6-18'. Perhaps so, but the targets of the British Government are not quite the same as those of the Catholic Church. The English edition is nevertheless advertised as 'A Catholic Approach' to this group of topics, with elements specifically 'based on the Church's teaching'.

*Alive to the World* promises guidance in teaching about personal, social and health education, sex and relationship education and even citizenship. A contributor to the English edition, Louise Kirk, writes:

*'The books cover a great many topics on physical, emotional and character development including good citizenship. However, underlying all of these are the central topics of family life and the importance of marriage, our Sex and Relationships Education. They are embedded in the teaching of the Catholic Church although the programme is not, as such, a religious one.'*

The text of the books is based on incidents in the lives of Charlie, his cousin, Alice, and some of their friends, who appear throughout the series. This gives a sense of continuity, as the characters grow older and more mature along with the readers. There is a point to be made about the choice of these characters. It is true that the approach of the authors is inclusive and wide-ranging. Many cultures and ethnic groups are represented, but the main characters are depicted as almost exclusively white, urban and middle class. Many of the readers whom the authors may reasonably expect to use the books may not identify themselves with the characters depicted here. It should not be difficult to adapt the drawings as well as the text to be more inclusive of ethnic diversity. The design of the books and the art work are otherwise uniformly clear and attractive. The teachers' guides are particularly useful and packed with imaginative suggestions for developing the material in the books. One of the incidental benefits of the series is the general knowledge that is introduced into the text. This material is judiciously placed in sections that deal with events and personalities from different periods in history and from different parts of the world. Readers will follow the short discussions of moral issues and pick up a much wider knowledge of the world from these references to science, literature, history, geography, and art.

Some might say that the language used in the text of these books is too demanding for children to read and understand, but the authors challenge the comfortable notion that children are incapable of being taught to understand 'difficult subjects' and 'difficult language'. Teachers are there to interpret as well as to inform. The authors have the confidence to assume a certain level of knowledge in their potential readers, to assume a willingness in their readers to learn and a readiness in teachers to teach. Our expectations of the ability of even young children to understand what is put before them have been too low for too long. *Alive to the World* challenges negative thinking about what children are capable of understanding. It deserves to be widely used.

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