OXFORD

Paul Hirst as a liminal figure and modernizing moralist

James C. Conroy ⓘ*

School of Education, University of Glasgow, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author. E-mail: james.conroy@glasgow.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Four years prior to the publication of *Moral Education in A Secular Society*, Hirst presaged his commitment to education as a moral enterprise in *The Logic of Education*, co-authored with R. S. Peters. A cursory glance at the index will confirm his (their) preoccupation with morality as a, and probably the, key condition of all education. Morality appears some 43 times in the index, considerably more than any other item, including the curriculum and knowledge. Add the many further references to moral education, moral judgement and sundry substantive moral conceits show that his concern with morality is indisputable. In an educational landscape preoccupied with the admittedly somewhat asinine contest between personal actualisation and performativity, perhaps Hirst's explicit preoccupation with education as a moral endeavour may appear rather anachronistic. Yet, at the time, this concern was central to the conversation as to educational purpose and practice and Hirst was the liminal figure in British education standing at the threshold between a post-War educational identity centred on religion, sacrifice and a social contract, on the one hand, and a new, more individualized, self-expressive culture, on the other. Arguably Hirst's most important contribution in this was to act as a midwife to a new way of thinking about morality and education. In this article I will suggest that Hirst's enduring importance to British education was in his liminal role as a moralist trying to wean the educational establishment off an increasingly unsustainable attachment to Christian piety as the motive force underpinning educational provision while simultaneously attempting to hold on to the virtues that had secured much social progress in the War period. In 1970, the same year as he published *The Logic of Education*, the precursor to the *British Journal of Religious Education*, *Learning for Life* published a series of discussions on ethics and education, repeatedly asking the question: 'Can ethics survive without religion?'. Through the lens of 21st century post-structralism, this can appear very odd but in 1970 it was commonplace in schools, universities, and indeed further education to explicitly see religion as the shape and energy of education. Hirst enters these controversies as an educational moralist intent on re-positioning moral education away from its status as a practical appendage to Christianity

and as an integral activity of education, itself considered as a moral good. Moreover, I will suggest that Hirst's account of moral education cannot be understood apart from his consideration of the general aims of education and that his voice has retained its echo long past his citation scores!

KEYWORDS: religion, post-war settlement, liminal, moral education, rationality

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to think back to being a student teacher in 1970s Britain without immediately conjuring up a few key figures; figures who had shaped a post-war approach to education where the moral imperatives appeared to be the lodestar for the enterprise in its entirety; figures such as Peters and Hirst but also Stenhouse, Wilson, McPhail, Taylor, and White amongst many others. It is perhaps unsurprising that someone who received their teacher education[1] at that moment would be aware of the import and shaping influence on education of the concerns of the Second World War along with its 'long withdrawing roar'. In this paper I wish to illuminate the seminal contribution of Paul Hirst to understanding two interdependent features of education in the 1970s, which continue to resonate in the 2020s. The first is the importance of moral education as the ground of the post-war democratic settlement and the second is the complicated role that religion plays in underscoring that. More than this, I wish to suggest that his concerns are pivotal in the shift from the post-war politics of solidarity to those of individualism and identity. To do so it is necessary to understand the policy discourse that emerges towards the end of the Second World War—a policy discourse that, interestingly, has strong parallels in the USA (Conant 1946). To see Hirst's enduring importance to British education is to see him as a liminal figure trying to wean the educational establishment off an increasingly unsustainable attachment to Christian piety as the motive force underpinning (moral) educational provision while simultaneously attempting to hold onto the virtues that had secured much social progress during the war period.

In what follows I illustrate, with reference to Government papers and discussions, the centrality of Christian (largely establishment Anglicanism) religious sentiment to the political framing of education as a moral enterprise. This is followed by an account of the ways in which Hirst responds to these conditions. In doing so I hope to illustrate how the development of the secularization thesis positions him as a transitional figure standing astride two worlds. Finally, I try to show how this liminal position leads him to conflate some issues concerning religion and schooling that might be better kept separate. And, in all of this, I hope to recognize Hirst's importance to the development of moral education in and beyond the UK.

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[1] At every juncture one should abjure the facile notion that the term 'teacher training' is adequate to the task of developing the sophisticated intellectual, moral, and affective capacities necessary to be a good teacher.

AFTER THE CARNAGE

The foundational assumption of the Butler Education Act of 1944, and its concomitant discussions, motions, and reports with respect to moral education, was that, after the dislocation and chaos of the Second World War, education would be central to refurbishing a rational moral democracy. More than this, Christian formation was to be loosely conceived of as the framework and resource for the shaping of a post-war polity that would secure the interests of all. Rather than focus on the Act itself, about which much has already been written, it is more interesting and useful to attend to some of preparatory and developmental material that surrounded the Act. Hence, careful scrutiny of a note on educational reconstruction from the then President of the Board of Education to the War Cabinet is rewarding. While the note is primarily concerned with such prosaic matters as teacher supply, class sizes, restructuring funding models, school inspections, and so forth in the middle of the war, it nonetheless has two recurring substantive points with respect to religion and morality. The first is its treatment of the overriding import of education as an instrument for underscoring liberal democracy such that: '[r]egimentation, which has been so harmful a feature of education in the past, is bound to occur if classes exceed thirty; and the chance of creating thoughtful citizenship, essential in a free democracy, will be greatly diminished' (Butler 1943: 13). The salvific narrative of post-war education is echoed across the UK, and the 1947 Report on Secondary Education in Scotland (The Fyfe Report) is yet more robust and direct on the import of education in securing democracy, observing that:

> There has been a fresh awakening to the value and the precariousness of our liberal way of life. It is cleat [sic] now that the marriage of freedom and order which democracy presupposes is possible only for a people conscious of its inheritance, united in purpose, and proof against the attacks of sophistry and propaganda; and that these qualities require not merely a literate, but an educated, nation, capable of a high degree of self-discipline, objective judgment and sustained vigilance. (Consultative Council on Education (Scotland) 1947: 4)

Beyond the flourishing of the polity and indeed the individual, much is said on the organization of religious interests and religious education. No other curriculum subject is treated with any such concern or consideration. Perhaps, more importantly, in the section on the future role of voluntary schools it was proposed that the service of the '*churches to the community as pioneers in public education, as the protagonists of Christian teaching in schools* … cannot be justly disregarded' (p. 4).

In these papers, the claim is that Christian democracy, while embodying some 'ambiguity', best captures the current and future state of Britain, its moral life and the educational imperatives that underscore it. The Clarke Report of 1947, concerned with the transition from school to life, robustly echoes the position that state-provided education in the UK has inherited the legacy of Christianity. The report, produced by the Central Advisory Council for Education,[2] echoes many

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[2] It is worthy of note that the membership of the Council included, as a statutory member, the Right Honourable the Bishop of Bristol. In the interests of balance it also included the voice of the Workers' Education Association.

documents of the period in being simultaneously hopeful and realistic. After dealing with concerns ranging from school building programmes through teachers' professional and personal identity to community and further education, it devotes an entire chapter to 'The Moral Factor', observing that:

> the object of education is to teach man how to live as an individual and in a community: the part religion has always played in our schools is proof enough of that … Even with the impetus of the Butler Act and a wholehearted co-operation of the churches, however fortunate education is about priorities, half a century's unremitting efforts will be required before we can hope to have good primary schools for all. (Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 1947: 81)

While conceding that the report offers a more subtle treatment of the complexity of moral education than many of the documents that come after it, acknowledging that a new accommodation will have to be found, it nevertheless robustly defends the existing order, arguing that it will have to be maintained and sustained by right effort and attention, through the recognition of otherness and the need for change but with a belief in the established order. Hence,

> To many, the Christian beliefs which in the past supported our moral teaching no longer make sense, although the moral values still make a strong appeal. To insist upon the beliefs appears an affront to the intellectual integrity of such men and women. On the other hand we are faced with an equally sincere assertion that if our moral standards are to be maintained it is essential to preserve Christian beliefs … One cannot but hope that the British tradition of life and conduct will not only continue to operate strongly among ourselves, but also influence other peoples in a greater or less degree. (Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 1947: 85)

The importance of this concern to refurbish education cannot be overstated and its implications for a kind of revivified civic Christianity are marked. Later in the Scottish report the drive to secure democracy is explicitly identified with the Christian religion such that it was considered that in training for citizenship,

> [One] of the major functions of the school [was] to pass on the moral and social inheritance and to direct the sentiments and habits of young people towards the good life … [S]ince the life of the west has its roots in the Christian religion, we consider it essential that the secondary schools should continue to give that instruction on the Bible which use and won't have long since established in Scotland. Our concern here is not to import something new into the curriculum but to ensure that what is being done after a fashion should be better done… . (Consultative Council on Education (Scotland) 1947)

The consequence of this, allied to a certain unwillingness to cash out the question over the following three decades, was that the importance of Christianity, whilst gently decaying, remained de facto the default. Indeed this ambiguity extended into, and beyond, the 1960s. Arguably, its salience remained evident in the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales. More prosaically, we can see it in the maintenance of the practice of religious observance in schools. To draw on an example from Scotland, 1989 saw the publication of a HMI report entitled, 'Religious Observance in Primary and Secondary Schools', where the authors observe that, 'It is often said in primary schools that, since fewer pupils experience

worship nowadays in church, it is more important that they experience it in schools' (HM Inspector of Schools 1989: 5).

Even as they acknowledged the decline of religious practice and affiliation, there remained an enduring impulse to sustain something akin to 'constructive' ambiguity. The durability of this 'secular' Christianity derived much of its energy from a very particular way of thinking about religion of which many philosophers, Christian and non-Christian alike, are justifiably critical—that is, the claim by those such as R. B. Braithwaite (Braithwaite 1955) that religion functions as the symbolic expression of our values. The reasons for this are complex, but surely the historian, Martin Conway, is right when he suggests that this explicit homage to Christianity or, to be more precise, to a humanist Christianity of the kind adumbrated by Braithwaite is an element in a trinity of complementary immediately post-war values that also comprised liberal intellectual norms and European identity (Conway 2021). The horrors and aftermath of the Second World War, he suggests, offered renewed energy to Christianity just as it was declining under the weight of science from such as Huxley and Darwin and the rise of nineteenth-century biblical historico-critical method criticism led by the Hegelian, F. C. Bauer (Baur Ferdinand 1867). In any event, explicit and implicit Christianity retained its hold over education with only modest challenge well into the 1960s and beyond.

(NOT QUITE) LEAVING THE WAR BEHIND

I would like to now turn to the 1960s and 1970s as both an extension of the post-war concerns and the space into which Hirst enters. At this time, fuelled by cultural, communications, and technological developments, the explicit treatment of moral education received a fresh sense of urgency. This was a moment characterized by shifts in popular culture away from the common good (for which Christianity had been totemic) and in pursuit of the individual will (Putnam and Garrett 2020). As an expression of these ideo-cultural shifts, the raising of the school leaving age and the dissolution of publicly agreed authority and norms (even where they were often privately ignored) provided a substantial challenge to both educators and policy-makers. A range of R&D programmes emerged, including many directly funded by the government through the Schools Council. Amongst the most influential were Lifelines directed by Peter McPhail (McPhail 1974) and the Humanities Curriculum Project, led by Lawrence Stenhouse (Stenhouse 1971) which, amongst other concerns, focused on the teaching of controversial issues. Others included the work of the Farmington Trust on the assessment of morality, directed by John Wilson and supported and published by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Wilson 1973).

Whilst acknowledging the social and cultural changes that were evident across society, Wilson maintained the tradition of constructive ambiguity towards Christianity as the bedrock of moral education. He was, however, by no means unique and McPhail's work detailed the myriad ways in which religious education (at this stage largely synonymous with Christianity) and moral education were conflated. Perhaps even more anomalous to the twenty-first-century eye was the

morally pregnant argument from a lecturer in a technical college (FE) that FE might offer the last chance to preach the truth of the Christian Gospel and that, while the task of the Christian lecturer was not to gain converts, it was 'to present the Christian truth at a time when the student is being blown about by every wind of doctrine' (Walling 1970). One way in which the belief in the import of religion to morality was expressed was by way of an argument based on compatibility super-erogation. Hence, the claims of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and moral activity are compatible in as much as they both point to freedom, involve rational choice, and are underscored by the capacity and capability for moral action. However, the argument goes, Christianity offers some additionality as it sees 'man's reason as vitiated and incomplete' (Greenwood 1973: 49). Ultimately the claim is a modest one: given the assumption that humans have ends and religions attempt to offer answers to such ends, the least that might be said is that the teleological claims of religion should be on the table in the conversation about morality. Lest this treatment of the moral and religious as co-dependants be thought of as rather too abstract, it is worth noting the findings of a modest study conducted by Jarvis at that time about the aims of education for those teaching the Warley Agreed Syllabus (Jarvis 1972).[3] Designed to ascertain the relative weight to be afforded different aims by religious education teachers, it was clear that moral intent significantly outweighed any other purpose, including 'teaching about God and teaching about Christ' by a factor of nigh on 3:1. Even the most benign reading of the many Agreed Syllabuses of the time could hardly fail to notice the substantial weight afforded Christianity as the ground for moral deliberation.

The arguments in favour of the agentic import of religion in securing moral advancement in and through education remained, if not ubiquitous, then certainly widespread, and it was into this arena of obfuscation, compromise, and temporizing that Paul Hirst ventured with 'Moral Education in a Secular Society' (Hirst 1974a). Hirst presaged his commitment to education as a moral enterprise in *The Logic of Education*, co-authored with R. S. Peters (Hirst and Peters 1970). A cursory glance at the index will confirm his (their) preoccupation with morality as *a*, and probably *the*, key condition of all education. Morality appears some 43 times in the index, considerably more than any other item, including the curriculum and knowledge. Add the many further references to moral education, moral judgment, and sundry substantive moral conceits, and his concern with morality is indisputable. Indeed, in what is essentially an undergraduate textbook, the constant refrain and appeal is to education as primarily a moral task. '[A]ny teacher', they argue, 'who wishes to work out more clearly where he [sic] stands on ethical issues must pursue these questions further in moral and social philosophy' (Hirst and Peters 1970: 41). And such a moral reading of the world and its contents constituted a particular 'form of knowledge'.

On reading their account of the curriculum, it is difficult not to have some sympathy for John White's (White 2010) insistence that the grounds for considering the construction of the curriculum based on the forms of knowledge thesis were

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[3] Agreed Syllabuses in English Local Authorities were instituted to offer local control over the teaching of RE so that it might be aligned with local demographics.

significantly flawed. In an interesting and well-documented piece, White argues that such forms of knowledge are predicated not so much on the internal logic, unique concepts, and ways of working that inhere in a particular disciplinary conversation as on a certain traditionalism borne out of fealty to the educational models of seventeenth-/eighteenth-century non-conformist Christianity. And, while White points out in his obituary that Hirst later eschewed much of his attachment to the Forms, it is possible, indeed desirable, to read Hirst's moral endeavours rather than his epistemic attachments as their foundation (White 2020). For him, acquaintance with moral reasons and reasoning were to be considered foundational and, as I will go on to argue, the kind of reason and reasons that Hirst favours carry a different emphasis from many of the concerns of current educational theory. While many others, including Peters, were directly concerned with the ethical timbre of educational practice, Hirst's distinctive contribution lies not in his shared concern with such general theorizing but in challenging the very specific arrangements that had endured since the 1870 Education Act and been afforded fresh energy in the backwash from the Second World War. It is undoubtedly true that, as Wright (Wright 2017) has pointed out, the complex relationship between secularist movements and both State and Church actors meant that the 'behind closed doors' conversations were often more nuanced than is usually discernible in the public spaces. Arguably, such 'hushed' conversations are at one with an infantilizing approach to public discourse that continues to resonate in public discussions about educational and political futures. Whatever else he wished for, Hirst was driven by a desire to make our choices on educational and social life transparent and accountable.

HIRST AS A THRESHOLD FIGURE

Hirst's most important contribution to our understanding of morality was manifest in his liminal posture as midwife to a new publicly and professionally transparent way of thinking about morality and public education (Conroy 2004). By this I mean to suggest that he stands between Church and State; between tradition and novelty; between what was and what is to become. Hirst's desire to wrest moral education from its framing within the post-war heritage of Christianity was not born out of any animus towards Christianity or religion more generally; in important respects it was an attempt to free Christianity from the burden of being the guardian of public morality and to be itself. Were this not so, it is unlikely that he would have collaborated so openly with those of a Christian bent. More pointedly, his arguments were grounded in the premise that there need be no artificial antagonism between the moral claims of reason and the moral claims of revealed religion—that is, providing religion sees its role as endorsing common reasoning.

In 1970, the same year as he published *The Logic of Education*, the precursor to the *British Journal of Religious Education, Learning for Life*,[4] published a series of

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[4] *Learning for Life* was the professional journal of the Christian Education Movement, an Anglican organization supporting religious education and religious schooling.

discussions on ethics and education, repeatedly asking the question, 'can ethics survive without religion?'. Hirst enters these controversies as an educational moralist intent on re-positioning moral education as something other than a practical appendage to Christianity and as an integral activity of education, itself considered as a moral good (Hirst 1972). In an important respect his consideration is a secular version of the age-old conundrum of Christian philosophy: Is X good because God wills it, or does God will X because it is good? For Hirst, if we are to make the assumption that there is a God then for any rational account of such a God's being, the Christian must accept that the good is not directly dependent upon God's willing it to be so. To do otherwise would subject Christian belief to the unthinkable possibility that the 'God of their fathers' could be despotic or open to the possibility of despotism. From this Hirst argues that traditional Christian claims to a distinctive morality are overwrought. If, as some versions of Christianity maintain, right action is revealed by God, how are we to know this other than through what people actually do? And, since the actions of Christian and non-Christian alike may be indistinguishable, what is it that belief adds that would make any difference in the public space?

Of course, within Christian theology there are a number of well-developed notions dealing with this issue (including Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian,[5] John Cobb's[6] universal presence of grace, and John Hick's[7] particular approach to the doctrine of *e pluribus unum*). These subtly, and not so subtly, different approaches all reflect something of the claim to conscious or unconscious inclusivity. This is not the place to go into the details of doctrinal claims that the inclusion of all, actually or potentially, adds something to the rational agreement on the moral good beyond giving reasons why we should do X rather than Y. While they may offer an explanatory logic from inside the language of religion itself, it is difficult to see how they can be a response to Hirst's claim that moral goods stand on their own rational grounds and no others. With respect to the notion that our morals are somehow shaped by divine help, he suggests that the claim is empty, telling us nothing, 'unless there is some way, other than the moral life itself, by which we can recognize the existence of divine help' (Hirst 1974a: 25). Importantly, he is not suggesting that there is no such thing as divine help in the discharge of the moral life, only that we can identify moral achievement in its own terms and not with reference to a further explanatory entity—the application of Occam's razor in the domain of publicly agreeing on what constitutes acceptable moral behaviour. His primary aim is neither the denial nor the denigration of the Christian (religious) world view but the securing of the autonomy of moral choice. He subverts the traditional Christian claim at the heart of *Learning for Living*, the debate as to whether morality can survive

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[5] The claim that even where someone has not explicitly subjected themselves to the doctrine of Christ's incarnation and the salvation predicated upon it, this does not mean that they are not saved as the disposition to live out the incarnation is an unconscious/implicit acceptance of the Gospel.

[6] Cobb's similar but different view is that since the *logos* (see John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word …') suffuses the universe through grace then all partake in that grace.

[7] John Hick's claim was that all religions were individuated responses to the one reality.

without religion. In doing so he deploys a secularist's version of the various anonymous Christian theses, suggesting that Christian teaching must surely recognize the legitimacy of an independent secular approach to the moral life if it is to legitimate its own claims that the moral life as a gift of creation is both natural and universal.

Nonetheless, Hirst is acutely aware that the appeal to what is natural, as the ground for moral agreement, is heavily constrained by the recognition that there is no singular determinate nature by which it may be measured. Rather, he suggests, we are much shaped by our socialization, by our emotions, by our skills … and that individual and communal life is somewhat indeterminate. And, in any event, were we to take a Hobbesian view, part of the task of securing human agreement on matters moral is to subdue the individual passions, which might, left to their own devices, lead to a life that is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Hirst is also sceptical of a related naturalistic inclination to justification by the seductive elision of fact and value. Following G. E. Moore (Moore 1903) he observed that no justification for moral agreement is to be found in any form of naturalism given that 'fact and value are logically different in kind [and] we must eschew every appeal to a solution along these lines however attractive it may appear' (Hirst 1974a: 33).

Despite Hirst's unease with the collapse of the distinction between fact and value he does acknowledge that it had become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of the dominance of the appetite in consumer culture. And, of course, appetites can govern our attitudes to not just material culture but to our political and cultural imaginaries. The difficulty with the appetites, as Hirst clearly recognized, is that they can be created as well as sustained. Indeed, the contemporary obsession with what one might think of as 'lifestyle porn' (from body to garden makeovers) is but one example of the capacity to manufacture markets and then sustain them. Ultimately as the 'old' order changeth, and as personal identity itself has evolved into a proto-moral category, any easy distinction between description and evaluation has frayed if not collapsed. In any event, Hirst substantially revises his initial concern with the fact–value elision in his later work acknowledging that it is difficult to uncover a transcendental argument of the Kantian variety (which was his own preferred stance in the 1970s). This does not mean that he abandons reasons, reason, and rationality, only that these should be qualified by the recognition that:

the more this view has been explored in critical debate, the more these very general formal principles have been seen to be dealing not at all with the freedoms and equalities of practical living but with abstracted ideal notions that have little real bite on what we actually do in practice. The detached theoretical perspective they relate to is in fact found to be one emptied of the intricate details of contemporary practical life… (Hirst 1999: 107)

So, what then was Hirst's prescription in the 1970s for a moral education, which had, at least prima facie, been dominated by the edicts of Christianity? Central to his argument was the proposition that moral deliberation and its consequent actions represented a distinctive form of knowledge (Hirst 1974b) that is not readily interchangeable with another form. He also considered that religion is itself a distinctive

form of knowledge even if he later adopted a rather more ambiguous position. It was important for Hirst, at the time, to offer a considered distinction between religion and morals as he attempted to unlock moral education from (what he considered to be) its incarceration in Christian theology and life. One political strategy for doing so was to mark out the conceptual and discursive territory of religion as a distinctive domain; though, as Hand has pointed out, this is a far from straightforward enterprise, given that understanding such standard Christian conceits as emerge from, for example, soteriology, eschatology, and the *paroussia* may not require any particular gnostic or other forms of theological and spiritual insight (Hand 2006). It may simply be that the propositional claims entailed in talk of salvation and eternal life are a source of disagreement. Of course, that does not mean that there are not other non-rational ways of considering such matters but that is another story entirely. Suffice at this stage to note the importance of Hirst's claims about the forms to his arguments about the self-sufficiency of moral deliberation and thus of moral education. So then, in what does this discrete domain consist?

Like Peters, Hirst considered that foundational principles underpin our moral action if it is, indeed, to be considered moral. He further suggested that not having a complete arsenal of principles to be tidily applied to whatever action, facts, situation, etc., should be no impediment to their exercise, given that all our strivings are subject to revision. Like the principles of science, those of moral reasoning form a set of conceptual relationships that allow us to adduce common and publicly shareable regulation, as well as agreement on the permissibility and desirability of particular actions. Three categories of governing rules shape our behaviour, according to Hirst. First, there are those imprinted into institutions where the members have obligations as well as rights and these are largely role-driven. Second, there are legal requirements, and third, there are generally agreed norms. None of these, he argues, is hermetically sealed, each from the other. Rather, they work in tandem even if there are significant differences of focus and shape. Importantly, Hirst recognized that none of these categories of rule-shaping are preserved in aspic and that each will change and shift as circumstances shift, such that, for example, the right to secure certain forms of privacy over one's own data is or may be expressed in unimaginably different ways from those considered normative in the early 1970s. Indeed, his secularizing response to the socially comprehensive morality of mid-twentieth-century Christianity was an expression of the ever-changing dynamic between the descriptive and the normative. This is not, as I have already observed, to consider that Hirst was a relativist or indeed that he himself considered Moore's distinction as pointless; it is rather that morality is adaptive. In this he was indeed a liminal figure, standing at the threshold between the application of institutionally derived behavioural norms and the rise of libertarian derived identity politics. With particular regard to the specifics of moral education, they should be seen as developmental; this too moves Hirst away from traditional forms of Christian moral education, which, while embodying some sense of the developmental, enjoyed it as but a rudimentary conceit. Until the 1970s, developmentalism in Christian morality was largely shaped by the timing of certain rites of passage in mid- and later

childhood (nominally, at the time, 7 and 9 years in the Catholic and related 'High Church' traditions). Initiation into the Sacrament of Absolution (confession and forgiveness) at age 7 implied culpability, while the process of Confirmation at age 9 made one a 'full and perfect Christian …'. However, in the late 1960s/ 1970s Christian catechetical and curriculum designers had also fallen under the spell of (Piagetian/Kohlbergian) developmentalism (from Brusselmans 1980[8] to Goldman 1964).

And yet, for all his acknowledgement of the import of developmentalism Hirst, ever the liminal figure between an older order and a new dispensation, retains some scepticism towards developmentalism as an educational panacea, arguing that, irrespective of the processes of reasoning, what matters is the rule-governed order, which is shaped not only by the structure of moral reasoning but by its substantive content. Hence, he observes with respect to Kohlberg that,

> The Outcome of forms of reasoning is not his concern. Yet this outcome is in a very real sense what morality is all about. It is conclusions in judgement we are after. True, consciously deliberated rational and autonomous judgement will provide the right conclusions, but most of our judgments cannot be so made. (Hirst 1974b: 95)

So, if these are the spheres of moral activity, what about the substance of morality? Whilst amateur psychoanalysis is always a dangerous path to tread, it is surely not coincidental for Hirst that, given the lack of personal choice and freedom evident in his own upbringing (White 2020), autonomy is foundational—that in a liberal democracy people have to be free to choose within the constraints of legitimate legal frameworks. Indeed, the primacy of autonomy was made concrete in the drive to persuade the Christian educational community that their best hope for sustaining moral education lay in an appeal not to tradition but to reason and reasons. With religions having replaced religion, and atheism and agnosticism gradually underpinning the *Weltanschauung* of increasing numbers, Christian educators as well as policy-makers and influencers needed to accommodate themselves to a new reality. And this reality meant that tradition alone was no guarantor of behaviour.

THE MORAL LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS SCHOOLING

Hirst extends the foundational quality of rationality and autonomy to the institutional character of schools, arguing that the same principles lead ineluctably to a rejection of the notion of the publicly funded religious school. While he allows that there may be a kind of education which might be called 'Christian education' (or indeed, Buddhist, Muslim, Humanist…), it is, he argues, a primitive concept given that it is concerned with intergenerational ideological reproduction. This primitive view of education stands in contrast to 'a second, more sophisticated [form], arising from a recognition that not all the things held to be true or valuable will be defensible on rational grounds…' (Hirst 1974b: 80). Hence, given that no reasons can be adduced for common accepted and agreed moral positions,

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[8] Christiane Brusselmans was an immensely influential Belgian religious educator in the Catholic tradition working in the 1970s and 1980s.

dispositions and actions that are not determined by rational agreement, religiously denominated schooling will always be morally inferior.

Arguably, this suggestion amplifies Hirst's position as a liminal figure, simultaneously looking backwards to the inter-war analytic traditions and forward to the dissolution of institutional certainties. His desire to maintain a toehold in the older order is evident in his earlier essay on liberal education (Hirst 1965), where he drew approvingly upon a range of explicitly Christian theorists in support of his vision of liberal education, including Arnold, Newman, and Maritain, but also argued that the study of religion embodies a distinctive form of knowledge. Moreover, a form of knowledge is, he argued, to be distinguished from a field of knowledge, which 'may or may not include elements of moral knowledge' (p. 131). In shaping these epistemic relations, he considered religion and history as (re)sources to be drawn upon in deliberating upon moral decision-making. This more open attitude to the import of religion as a resource in moral education, nested in a liberal education, appears to have dissolved by the time he pens *Moral Education in a Secular Society*. Here he argued that 'what cannot be part of education, however, would be seeking to develop say, a disposition to worship in [any] faith, or certain emotions of love of God, when that very disposition, or these emotions, are only justifiable development if the religion is accepted by the individual' (Hirst 1974a: 84). Of course, philosophers, like everyone else, are perfectly entitled to change, develop, and evolve their opinions and arguments. However, it is at least arguable that, in his desire to provide a comprehensive account of the educational response to secularization, he conflated the grounding or basic conditions with all possible conditions. It is here, once again, that we see Hirst as a boundary figure, standing at the threshold between an older, pre-war, order of parental responsibility and the rise of the State and its institutions.

While reasons and rationality are clearly a necessary ground for a common morality in a secular liberal democracy, they may not be the only desirable conditions for a fully flourishing liberal democratic polity. There are some interrelated reasons why Hirst may be over-stating the case. First, the complexity of the relationship between the family and the State with respect to moral education is dealt with in what must perforce be described as a perfunctory manner. Here Hirst wishes to offer a clear and substantive division between education and other social practices associated with child-rearing and religious activities. In his desire to advocate a pure education founded on the principles of moral autonomy he somehow misses the point that formal education is itself, always and everywhere, a 'nested social practice' (Conroy et al. 2014). Common education is a compact between the home and the school as the agent of the State—one does not have to subscribe to a thoroughgoing libertarian doctrine to acknowledge that parents tend not to have children so that they can hand them over to the State (Conroy 2010). While a parent may have civic as well as legal obligations to bring their children up in accordance with the laws of the land, there is nothing in a justificatory liberal morality to oblige them to do so when such laws might be inappropriately coercive. Moreover, should I wish to nurture my children in those traditions I hold sacred, whether they be

Buddhist or Humanist, Christian or Muslim, and to do so in concert and collaboration with other like-minded citizens, then surely in a liberal polity this should be permissible.

Second, and related to the first set of issues, is the challenge posed by the moral philosophy of some of Hirst's near contemporaries, most especially, Iris Murdoch, whose account of the moral life draws heavily upon religious insights in Christianity and Buddhism, and offers both a different starting point and a potential justification for religiously denominated education. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (Murdoch 1970), Murdoch argues, in Platonic fashion, that our ethical life is shaped not merely by the rationality of the decision but by how we stand in the world. How we see the world frames our attitudes, is stipulative of our behaviour, which, in turn, shape the practical moral intellect. The good, she argued, emanates from and is determined by the extent of our love of the world. In arguing this she draws explicitly upon Buddhist insights to articulate this love as a form of 'unselfing'; a way of combatting the 'fat relentless ego'. And in doing so, she shares Hannah Arendt's obsession with the love of the world, which she, in turn, derives from Augustine (Arendt 1998)—a love of the world that demands a turning away from the allure of desire, where one possesses the world and its contents. Only in such an act of *metanoia* can one return to the world in love as one who is self-offering. Hence, a form of schooling predicated on the virtues of *agape* offers not, as Hirst considers, a diminutive, under-formed or chimerical kind of education but a potential surplus of meaning, justification, and seeing. Such a surplus does not diminish reason or reasons, nor does it evade the call to autonomy: rather it offers, or may offer, additionality and qualification.[9]

The idea that somehow such practices, are self-evidently something different to education may be a rather leaky boat in which to set sail, given Hirst's concession that not every decision can on every occasion rest on the full-blown deliberation of the autonomous individual. Rather, he suggests we must perforce rely sometimes on rule-governed convention. Of course, Hirst might offer a counter-argument to the effect that while one may privatize these practices, they should not be conducted in the common spaces paid for by common taxation. While this might superficially satisfy the question of the common purse and the pursuit of common civic objectives, it hardly deals with Hirst's overriding concern—that no education can be considered entirely satisfactory that does not meet his reading of rational autonomy. This leads to related political and educational considerations regarding autonomy, not least with respect to its developmental quality (Conroy 2019). Hirst acknowledges that the school is, developmentally, an extension of the family and that it cannot ignore the upbringing that precedes entry into school. However, he considers all these matters as extra-educational—important for both individual and society but not the business of moral education. And yet, if we are to cultivate the rational autonomous moral individual, we cannot marginalize the packages of experience that form them. The idea that somehow our formation and our education may be

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[9] While this argument has some similarity to the compatibility supererogation discussed earlier, it is different in important respects including differences in teleological claims.

hermetically sealed, one from the other, is ultimately unpersuasive, and there are worse offences to the exercise of rationality than teaching students that 'love of God and love of the world' may shape, make, and reinforce moral judgment.

In all of this, as I suggested at the outset, Hirst may be considered an important, even if unwitting, transitional figure in the rise of the individual complete with their concomitant obsessions of identity—his over-reliance on the rationally autonomous individual as the ground for moral education presages the move away from those older, more formal and collectively constrained post-war forms of solidarity, community, and Christian culture, to an educational culture of individual and, indeed, individuated rights. This in turn has increasingly given rise to libertarian energies, not only in political life and culture but, more specifically, in education (Conroy 2021). In important respects Hirst's scepticism concerning the appropriateness of the liberal democratic state's support for the religiously denominated schools continues to resonate. He wants to hold onto forms of solidarity that were, in the post-war period, stipulative of moral education while facilitating the rise of the individual. While he certainly was not the only protagonist, in the context of late twentieth-century British education, he was an important catalyst.

CONCLUSION

Having acknowledged some weaknesses in Hirst's position, we can, at the same time, recognize his importance as a boundary figure between different worlds; between a world where Christianity did indeed play a dominant and not always healthy role in the coercive determination of the moral language of schools and one where autonomy would strike the dominant note in the language of moral education; between the world of institutional fidelity and trust and individual scepticism; between a world that was trying to rebuild a common liberalism in the wake of a catastrophic war and one where liberalism would turn towards libertarianism. Whether one ultimately agrees or disagrees with Hirst on the detail, there can be little doubt of his importance as one who sat at the boundary between these different worlds and who largely, if not fully, navigated the complexities and contradictions, and did so with some grace. Recent turns in both politics and education have been witness to the diminution of truth-telling, reasons, and justifications and their displacement by lies, exaggerations, and appeals to false sentiment (Conroy 2021). Moreover, one of the ironies of our present condition is that the decline of our institutions and their governance has been accompanied, not by the rise of rationality, but by the resurgence of appetite—an impulse that Hirst consistently tried to repel. Despite my modest reservations, a return to Hirst is no fruitless task but remains a rewarding experience worthy of our continued attention.

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