

A Review of Education and Society: A Christian View of Public Education in Singapore

by Daniel H. Chew

Book: Phillip A. Towndrow, *Education and Society: A Christian View of Public Education in Singapore* (Singapore: Ethos Institute for Public Christianity, 2015)

The Ethos Institute is a group which is formed from the collaboration of the liberal Trinity Theological College and the Bible Society of Singapore, and it purports to “serve church and society by engaging contemporary issues and trends from the Christian perspective” (p. vii). One of the booklets it has produced is one on the Christian perspective on public education in Singapore. Is the booklet actually biblical? While certainly the Scriptures are not explicit on the matter of education, yet since Scripture addresses all of life, thus there are certain guidelines to education, and thus we must evaluate the claims of this booklet according to those Scriptural principles

From a perusal of the booklet, it can be already seen that what the Scripture teaches play a very low priority in the writing of this booklet. The booklet borrows uncritically from the modern educational philosophy set out by UNESCO and the writings of the American pragmatist John Dewey. Scripture is relegated to the attitude the student is to bring to the educational endeavor after everything else about education is settled. The “Christian perspective” in this booklet is thus relegated to moralism, which is an unbiblical distortion of the law of God.

Review

The booklet by Phillip Towndrow starts off by examining the educational scene in Singapore in the past few decades and the various educational methods and pedagogies employed. Towndrow differentiates between education “to live a life” (p. 8-9) and education “to earn a living” (p. 10), then focuses on the issue of human capital. In the next chapter, Towndrow critiques various educational philosophies concerning performance and achievement from a secular social science perspective. In the third chapter, Towndrow brings in the idea of “kingdom purposes” where certain “Christian” moral truths are brought in as to how one should educate in a way that is “moral,” but unsurprisingly the moral values emphasized here sound like a thinly veiled baptized version of secular humanist rights (respect of individual, strong individual identity, acceptance of change, development of wisdom, character and leadership) (pp. 26-34). The fourth and last chapter seeks to apply all that has been mentioned so far to teachers, parents and students, to conclude the book.

If we want to come up with a Christian view of education, then we should start with Scripture, not culture or secular philosophy. Specifically, what does Scripture speak concerning education. What we find in the Old Testament is that education is meant to be geared towards the worship of God (Deut. 6:20-25; 11:18-20). Skills for daily living of

course are passed down through the generations, so there is no denying a practical aspect to education. Nevertheless, the goal of education in the Old Testament is piety towards God.

In the New Testament times, the focus is on the proclamation of the Gospel, as the Church is not a civic entity like Israel. Yet, while education is not directly addressed, the Scriptures made it plain that Christians are called to have a transformed mind (Rom. 12:2) and to be discerning like the Bereans (Acts 17:11). All of these would be congruent with an education that teaches people to think, for God the Creator and the *Logos* forms language and logic for humanity to think, the apparatus for right thinking so that one can think God's thoughts after Him.

The focus of education that is actually Christian therefore is that of nurturing the life of the mind with a goal of piety towards God. The classical education model of the trivium (logic, dialectic, rhetoric) is one great way of teaching people **how** to think (not just what to think), and together with instructions in the things of God, the intended product of such an education would be a thinking and pious population.

Having set up in brief what the Scriptures say concerning education, let's contrast that with what Towndrow has said. We noticed immediately that Towndrow, for all the bluster about a "Christian view," does not even bother to go to the Scriptures to find out what education is supposed to be. The secular and very modern 20th century educational philosophy of John Dewey is taken as axiomatic. But since when is pragmatism and utilitarianism Christian? Chapter 2, which is supposed to be a critique of educational philosophies, reads like a paper that could be turned in for a secular pedagogy class at NIE (National Institute of Education). So why should anyone call Towndrow's position a Christian view at all? The only "Christian" part that might qualify is the later section (Chapter 3), and it is to this that we will look now.

In chapter 3, Towndrow puts forward the "Christian" part of education as being about the virtues that should be nurtured in education, part of which claimed to be from the Scriptures. The first virtue is that of respecting others, which Towndrow derives from the creation account and the image of God motif (p. 26). Now, while respecting others and having self-worth is a virtue, Scriptures also speak about Man's depravity and the need for a new creation reality, i.e. redemption. The *Imago Dei* speaks about the created glory of Man, but also because it is marred by the Fall, how much humanity has fallen short of what we were intended to be. The second virtue is that of self-denial and humility (pp. 26-7), all great virtues, but aside from Christ an impossibility.

As applied specifically to education, Towndrow speaks of the ability to embrace change (pp. 28-9). The ability to embrace change when change is necessary is of course a good thing, but it has nothing to do with what Scripture teaches, which is to stand fast on God's truth (1 Cor. 15:2, 2 Tim. 1:13). We have mentioned identity and self-worth, which are Christian virtues that are for all Christians however and not just for education. Also, what exactly is "public education from a Kingdom outlook" (p. 29) since Towndrow did not even deal with the Christian theology and philosophy of education? The development of

wisdom and knowledge (pp. 29-31) is a good pursuit, but since when did biblical wisdom serves secular causes like "human welfare" and "caring attention towards the oppressed and the suffering"(p. 30)? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7a). Biblical wisdom is not just a biblical outlook for anyone to partake, but it is only for those who fear God and worship Him. To state wisdom from God as an educational goal means that one must commit to educate and persuade students of the Christian faith, which I am sure isn't what Towndrow had in mind for education in a pluralistic society. Character development (p. 31, 33) is good, but hardly uniquely Christian. The only uniquely Christian part about character development is that the regeneration of the heart, even more fundamental than a good character, is required so that Man will actually want to obey God joyfully. Nurturing a good character by willpower, good influence and discipline will make one at best a Pharisee, for the unregenerate heart will still rebel against God even in doing good. Lastly, leadership development (p. 32) might be a good thing to have, but that has nothing to do with the Scriptures, which calls us to holiness and love for our neighbor.

If the entire list seems to be all about conduct, about morals without Christ, that's because it is. Even if we were to grant all these things to be good things for education, what has that to do with the Christian faith at all? Christianity is not about being good people, for we are not (Rom. 3:10-18). The type of system that Towndrow is promoting is Moral Therapeutic Deism, and it is not Christianity. Christianity is not about being moral, but about Christ dying for sinners so that he atoned for their sins, propitiating the wrath of God against them and justifying them by faith alone. So, if Towndrow's education is all about rules and conducts, and not the news that all are wicked before God and the Gospel is the only way to salvation, then it is not Christian no matter how many virtues he wants to promote.

Towndrow closed this chapter with an assertion that there is "absolutely no conflict between Christian and public views of society, in general, and education, in particular" (p. 34). It is unclear what exactly he is referring to. If one actually starts with Scripture, then there is conflict between a Christian view of society and a humanistic view of society. But if one were to refer to whether there are common spaces where different views of society and education can coexist, and thus there is no clash between peoples, then yes, there is no conflict in this sense, for Christians do believe in the common sphere of society.

In conclusion, we have seen that there is a Christian view of education, but unfortunately Towndrow's booklet fall far short of actually providing a true Christian view on education. I cannot say I am surprised, but it surely is sad that such drivel represents the supposed intellectual prowess of Singapore Christianity.