

Introduction

During the last thirty five years, a growing number of parents have withdrawn their children from State administered schools often provoked by a belief that government sponsored education is morally and spiritually apathetic. Mostly they have opted to have them educated in parochial, religiously-based schools (Callan 1989; Parker 1995a, 1995b; Frisken 1993a, p.1). This has, in part, been made possible by changes to funding of independent schools in Australia over the last twenty five years. Two groups that have attracted parents for these (as well as other) reasons are Christian Community Schools Ltd (hereafter as CCSL) and Christian Parent-Controlled Schools Ltd (hereafter as CPCSL). The schools comprising these two groups represent the largest proportion of the Association of Australian Christian Schools (AACCS), an association that is responsible for the education of 'more than 60,000 children enrolled in over 200 Christian schools around the country' (Parker 1995b); the first CPCSL school, Calvin Christian School, began in 1962 in Kingston, Tasmania (CPCSL 1991, p.2; Deenick 1991, p.243) and the first CCSL school, Christian Community High School, began in 1976 in Regents Park, New South Wales (CCSL 1993, p.1).

During this time, there has been much debate on philosophical issues related to religiously-based parochial schools. While the issues are many, varied and complex, two important ideas demarcate some boundaries of the debate: the nature of education in a pluralist liberal democratic society and parental desire to provide a religious upbringing, and thus education, for their children. The growth and development of both CPCSL and CCSL stand as an example of this debate. On the one hand, critics of these types of

schools argue they do not provide adequate preparation for students to enter the pluralist liberal democratic society of which they are a part; on the other hand, advocates of this type of education appeal to issues related to the desire of parents to provide a religious upbringing for their children. For many parents, growth in their children's understanding and practice of faith are more important than any other considerations. Thus it appears a chasm exists between the two ideological positions.

Surprisingly, these schools have provided low levels of interest to the broader academic research community; this is despite the fact that CCSL and CPCSL together represent a significant presence within the Australian educational community. Research in the area has been predominantly of an ethnographic style (Barnett 1981, Gordon 1988, Collins 1989) and frequently written from a sympathetic or apologetic perspective. Furthermore, fundamental questions concerning the philosophical validity of these types of schools within a pluralist liberal democracy seem to be assumed by most of these writers. These studies operate according to the following type of investigation: given the validity of this type of Christian education, what are some of the curriculum and/or methodological difficulties faced in its implementation? Lambert's (1993) study, although similar in its philosophical framework, is an ethnographic study of three British Christian schools and thus has a number of significant differences from the Australian situation. It seems, however, that there has not yet been a detailed philosophical critique of this type of educational model from those associated with this type of education. This may be demonstrable of Long's view that 'criticism of policy and practice in themelic² schools is interpreted as an attack on the dispositions on which they depend' (Long 1997, p.22).

¹ Whilst the focus of Barnett's (1988) study, Inaburra High School, Menai, is not a CCSL or a CPCSL school, a number of the underlying philosophical assumptions are of a similar nature.

² Long (1996a) has coined the identifier that specifically and uniquely refers to these schools as *themelic* coming from the New Testament Greek word, *themelios*, meaning 'Christ is the foundation'.

Two studies that have attempted to address some philosophical concerns are Blomberg's (1980) investigation of how Dooyerweerd's cosmogenic idea can inform curriculum development in the Christian Parent-Controlled School, and Long's (1996a) charting of the growth and nature of thematic schools. In this particular study, Long recognises that *theological* as much as philosophical, psychological and sociological foundations of the diverse sponsoring schools impact upon the nature of administration and curriculum orientations within them. Long argues that in order to understand differing educational perspectives between schools one must understand the *theological and philosophical* assumptions that underpin these schools (Long 1996b, pp.7-8).

Critics of these schools see their aims as contrary to the broad aims of education in pluralist liberal democracies, but their criticism has not been prolonged or sustained. Much criticism has focused on issues such as funding, indoctrination, parental choice in education, whether creation ought to be taught as science, the role of corporal punishment or other sociological factors deriving from insularity (Hill 1978, 1982; Fernhout 1990; Marginson 1993; Speck and Prideaux 1993; Gibson 1995). The long running debate between McLaughlin and Gardner during the 1980's and early 1990's mostly sought to clarify some of the main philosophical differences concerning the provision of a religious upbringing for children. The most widely recognised criticism of Christian schooling is that of Peshkin (1986), but this is a sociological study of a Christian school in the United States of America rather than a philosophical study. Furthermore, the nature of Christian schools in the United States of America is considerably different and thus Peshkin's study is of limited application to the Australian situation. There is, then, evidence that little consideration has been given to fundamental philosophical principles and concepts that underpin these Australian schools.

Given this context, it is appropriate to undertake a critical philosophical analysis of these schools. This study seeks to address five questions: first, is it possible to justify the existence of these schools within the context of a pluralist liberal democratic society, and, if so, how; second, what philosophical problems exist within such an educational model; third, is it possible to overcome these problems, and, if so, how; fourth, would such changes be able satisfy both the demands of educational models within a pluralist liberal democratic society as well as support the faith aims of the original model; fifth, how likely is it that those involved in these schools will be prepared to consider such changes to their philosophy? To answer these questions, this study will involve philosophical analysis and critique of the educational model developed by CCSL. This model is referred to throughout as *biblically-based Christian education* (hereafter as BCE). Although Long (1996a) has used the word 'themelic' in his identification of these schools, the phrase *biblically-based Christian education* seems to more adequately focus the proper concern of this present study. The term BCE has been chosen because of the enormity of the role played by the Bible within the model; issues such as epistemic foundations, derivation of hermeneutic authority and truth claims are all located within the philosophical role of the Bible. Long recognises that amongst schools associated with this type of educational model, 'education without the centrality of "the Word" is deemed to be not fully Christian' (1996b, p.10). The term BCE is thus more meaningful within the context of this present study. The BCE model is outlined in a number of documents published by CCSL, other texts referred to in these documents (in the form of secondary sources), and other texts related through philosophical similarity (particularly those by writers associated with CPCS). These texts are used in both the description of the BCE model as well as the critical analysis.

To address the above questions, the thesis is divided into three parts.

Part I: The social and philosophical context.

Firstly, the social context of the problem is defined; that is, it is recognised that Australia exists as a society in theory committed to pluralist liberal democratic ideals. An overview of educational history in New South Wales (as one sector of the broader Australian community) clearly identifies that growth toward these ideals has occurred over the past two centuries; a brief assessment of current educational documents indicates that these ideals still hold currency.

Secondly, the philosophical context of the problem is then defined. This exists in two parts:

a) Educational ideals in pluralist liberal democracies: It is fair to assume that an educational model within a pluralist liberal democracy ought to be compatible with the general principles underlying such a society. Given this social context (i.e., pluralist liberal democracy), what orientation is required within models of education in order for them to be considered valid? It will be argued there are four criteria by which the orientation of educational models within pluralist liberal democracies can be evaluated:

- i) a commitment to the ideals of pluralist liberal democracy;
- ii) a critical investigation of a personal world view;
- iii) an investigation of alternative world views;
- iv) active teaching for tolerance towards alternative world views.

b) Parental rights to provide a religious upbringing: It is argued that freedom of religious expression is a fundamental right within a liberal society and thus the right to provide a religious upbringing for one's children can also be reasonably argued. However, the question to be addressed concerns what type of religious upbringing will satisfy both the rights of the parents to provide a religious upbringing; and still meet the necessary requirements for education in a pluralist liberal democracy. Is it possible to find a model that is acceptable to both concerns? It will be argued that parents do have a right

to educate their children within a faith community in so far as this does not limit the extent to which critical self-reflection and respect for those of different world views can be developed. It may be objected by some that the development of critical self-reflection and respect for other world views is contrary to the development of faith (particularly within the context of an exclusivist faith position). However, it will be further argued that many religious educators (including those with similar views to the CCSL writers) maintain the necessity of developing some notion of autonomous faith development as central to enduring Christian faith.

Part II: An outline of the BCE model.

Taken primarily from documents published by CCSL, the model will outline the rationale for the existence of these schools, an explanation of the importance of the Bible to the development of the educational model, a description of the central faith aims, an explanation for the importance of “community”, the epistemological foundations, and curriculum orientation.

Part III: A critique of the model.

It will be argued that on the basis of arguments put forward in support of parental rights to provide a religious upbringing for children there does exist some validity in the BCE model. However, it is recognised that in order to be considered valid within the context of a pluralist liberal democracy, such an upbringing must not limit the extent to which it is possible for children to develop critical self-reflection and respect for those of alternative world views. Under these conditions, it will be argued that a number of fundamental problems exist for the BCE model:

i) the epistemic foundation: The BCE model stands or falls on the strength of its claim that ‘it is only when [education] is based on reverence for God and belief in the Bible as His inerrant revelation that man is able to know the truth’ (Friskén 1993a, p.2). A number of unquestioned assumptions exist that impact upon this issue: what is meant by the term ‘revelation’? has God

communicated? how has God communicated? can we be certain that the communication is from God' in what sense is it 'inerrant'? what are appropriate ways to use the Bible and its message? These assumptions impact highly upon the use of the Bible within the BCE. The status of revelation is used as the epistemic basis for the model but the relationship between biblical revelation and the educational principles derived therefrom will be seen to be less simple than advocates of the BCE model suggest.

ii) the hermeneutic authority: It often appears that views expressed in the BCE documents are intended to definitively represent what Frisken (1993c, p.7) refers to as 'the mind of Christ'; they are constantly referred to as, and assumed to be, 'biblical' ideas despite their contentiousness (Judge 1983; Hill 1982). Furthermore, Christians are encouraged to see that 'the establishment of a Christian school should be a matter of obedience to conviction by the Holy Spirit' (Frisken 1993a, p.7). This seems problematic. By evoking 'biblical' authority and 'conviction by the Holy Spirit' strong authoritarian ideals are manifest. The location of these ideals in strong areas of faith does not encourage active engagement with the ideas for fear of being unbiblical, rebellious against God and His Word (here the deliberate dual reference is to the Bible and Jesus Christ), or, worse still, heretical. Furthermore, the role of interpretation is elevated and given biblical status. This is highly problematic and results in a confusion between philosophical, theological and biblical ideas. The elevation of the former two ideas into the latter is based on the contentious assumption that the interpretive function of the church is authoritative. Consequently, ideas that are derived through interpretive methods become incontrovertible on the basis of this authority.

iii) the philosophical status of exclusivist religious truth claims: Any religious truth claim that claims to be a participant in public dialogue (as with the BCE view) must be expressed in such a way as to enable dialogue with others outside its own paradigm. Use of words like "truth" and "revelation"

within the context of broader society are highly contentious and not at all self-evident. It is likely that the emphasis on “truth” and “revelation” that exists within the paradigm of the BCE model will lead to an inability to dialogue with those outside the faith community. This is more likely to result in intolerance and to isolate those who adhere to such a view. This obviously restricts the likelihood of meaningful dialogue with those outside the faith community.

iv) a technical curriculum orientation: The predominant orientation is one that incorporates strong elements of control in curriculum design, emphasis on knowledge acquisition and correct dogma, as well as strong authoritarianism; this is often identified as a technical orientation (Grundy 1987). The curriculum does not encourage critical insights and therefore opportunity for students to undertake critical investigation of a personal world view is limited. Rather, it involves application of predetermined “biblical” principles. Yet, paradoxically, there is much within the model that suggests an emancipatory orientation, particularly the strong emphasis on community and such teachings of the Christian faith as equality and justice. However, the strong elements of a technical orientation make it more difficult for the practical and emancipatory aspects of the BCE model to adequately inform the work of the BCE school.

v) opportunity for understanding and respecting alternative world views: There is little (if anything) in the BCE model that leads students to a serious consideration of any social or cultural appreciation of alternative world views. Investigation is undertaken from a *theological* perspective only; different world views are assessed for the extent to which they correlate with or differ from the BCE world view. This produces a diminished understanding of other world views as it does not take into consideration any phenomenological understanding of these views; it is a cognitive understanding only. As a result, students may have little or no idea of how

these religions (as well as other non-religious world views) contribute to contemporary pluralist liberal democratic society. It is difficult to see how such an investigation can be considered one that leads to understanding, nor is it likely to lead to an appreciation that other religious and non-religious positions still make positive contributions to public society (Macedo 1995).

vi) stages of faith development: There is no clear expression of how faith develops nor appropriate consideration of what adjustments may be made to faith development at different stages. It seems inappropriate to use the same methods for a range of students as broad as 5 to 18 years old. Furthermore, without a clear indication of how faith develops teachers may end up with unrealistic expectations concerning the faith development of students.

Given that there are valid reasons why religious parents have the right to seek a religious upbringing for their children, it seems evident that some critical questions exist for the BCE model and its proponents: is it possible to overcome difficulties apparent within the model and yet maintain commitment to their primary faith aims? Accordingly, what changes would need to be incorporated into the model to make it valid within the context of a pluralist liberal democratic society of which it is a part? I will argue it is possible to meet the demands of both the faith aims of the BCE model and those of education in a pluralist liberal democracy. In order to do this, the BCE model will need to demonstrate a capacity to meet the criteria identified as appropriate in Part I for a pluralist liberal democracy, be founded on strong biblical principles and go beyond the strong technical orientation of the current BCE model. It will need to have mechanisms for teaching both the truth belief of its own world view as well as mechanisms for teaching about the validity and value of alternative world views. Because of the complex interrelationship between theology and epistemology identified by Long (1996a, 1997), it will need to have theological as well as epistemological

validity, both for those within and without CCSL. There will also need to be a strong emphasis on the role of the community of faith in education. I will argue that a Christian Praxis Education orientation based on Groome's (1980) and Astley's (1994) Christian religious education as well as Hobson and Welbourne's (1997) Transformational Christian Education model is well suited to achieving these goals

There seems a number of reasons why a study of this nature is important. First, the growth of critical research into the CCSL educational model has not been commensurate with the growth of the schools. These schools no longer represent a fringe group, but are more broadly represented within the wider educational community. Thus it is appropriate for these schools to be assessed for the extent to which they are able to meet broad requirements of education in pluralist liberal democracies, even more so given they have a stated aim to provide the following type of education:

[It] meets or surpasses all the legitimate education requirements established by the state that normally enables students to receive state accreditation, to then be effective members of the Australian community. (Friskin 1993a, p.2)

Second, Long (1996a; 1997) states that themelic schools have been analysed from the surface only and that there is need to unearth epistemological and hermeneutic assumptions of these schools; this is a particularly important statement given the breadth of Long's study and its recent completion. Third, a study of the philosophical foundations of these schools will seek to identify and clarify basic epistemological and hermeneutic assumptions underpinning this type of educational model. It is hoped this would provide a focal point for future discussion on what has often been a debate about peripheral issues. Fourth, recent debate in philosophy of religion regarding the nature of revelation provides useful insights that can be related to the role of the Bible in Christian educational thinking. This issue is of great importance due to the centrality and authority of the Bible within the educational model developed

by CCSL. These insights also have relevance to issues such as exclusivism and truth claims, both of which are central to the philosophical basis of the model. Lastly, it is hoped that the study can provide CCSL schools with critical insights into their philosophical framework. Critical reflection is an integral part of any valuable educative process and, in the absence of any prior work of this nature as far as CCSL is concerned, it is hoped this study will demonstrate to many associated with CCSL the need for critical reflection. It is further hoped this study will prompt others, particularly those within CCSL, to undertake more *critical* research into this model of education.