CAREERISM, A FORM OF ATHEISM?

By PAUL EDWARDS

IT WAS A monday morning and I was offering Mass with a class of thirteen year olds. I had decided to re-read the gospel of the day before, because it was the story of that poor chap for whom one never ceases to feel sorry, the rich young man. When I had declaimed the reading, we got down to our usual dialogue. It was a surprise to me how well the boys had retained the narrative, and how well they understood it. Perhaps there had been some very good preaching in the parishes of Leeds the previous day. They took me accurately through the account of the interview between Christ and the young man. They knew the subsequent discussion between Jesus and the twelve and could quote the statement that 'it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kindom of God'. They cited Christ as saying that there is no one who has given up anything for his sake, and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundred times as much. What really impressed me was that they were also able to tell me that this did not mean that you would get a hundred houses, or a hundred times as much money, but that what Christ offers us is of incomparably higher value than anything we give up.

I closed the lectionary, made as if I were going to go on with the Mass and half turning away said with an air of finality, 'so none of you want to be rich'. Thirty years had prepared me for what followed. The boys' heads came up; their backs stiffened; they shifted in their seats and a wave of negation, of repudiation of my conclusion came at me like the wash of a passing steamer at a rowing boat. They wanted to be rich alright! I swung back to give battle. 'But', I argued, 'you have just told me that it is harder for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of God, than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle'. They were not yielding an inch; but they were willing to save face — my face, I suspect — by suggesting ways out of the impasse. 'You could leave your money to the poor in your will', offered one lad. 'That', I said, 'is not giving a penny away, since you can't take it with you'. Determined to hang on to the possibility of a fortune, and wanting to retain some sort of option on the Kingdom, he persisted,

read more at www.theway.org.uk

'You could give it away the day before you die'. But I had no intention of letting them slither out of the dilemma. 'You have just told me that a rich man can't get into the Kingdom and now you tell me you want to be rich'. One child called out, 'What's the Queen going to do?' 'That', I said, rather unchivalrously, I suppose, 'is her problem'. They continued to sit there to show their discontentment with me. The rich young man went away sad, for he had great possessions. These boys had only the wish to be rich, but for me to be censorious about it was irritating.

I am perfectly accustomed to this reaction because I have used this gospel several times. The sixth form are less vigorous in their reaction, largely I think, because they take one less seriously — which is their mistake. They are less naïve in their evasions than the younger boys. Yet I have had it pointed out to me that the young man could not have given up his riches unless he were rich in the first place. And I have been asked, 'what will the poor do when the rich have given all their money away?' Whenever I succeed in making them face this gospel, they oppose a shield wall of undintable obduracy, like roman legionaries rallying round their eagle. The comparison is rather apt, because they are protecting the object of a pagan cult.

I first experienced this unholy dedication thirty years ago, when I set my class of thirteen year olds to write on the subject 'Why study?' Because some of them were very intelligent boys indeed, and I was new and silly, I cheerfully anticipated that they would show some grasp, however rudimentary, of the value of knowledge to man. All thirty-four of them gave me the same answer. They offered just one reason for studying. If you study, you get a better job afterwards. And it was obvious that 'better' did not mean more interesting, more stimulating, more valuable to society, but simply better paid. The boys had learned nothing from my question, but I had learned a good deal from their replies. These boys had been encouraged 'to do well' at school, to study for the eleven plus, to work at the grammar school, to do their homework and revise for their exams, because they would be 'better off' afterwards. If they swallowed this piece of self-centred materialism as bait, then they were 'good boys'. So, to be industrious in the pursuit of a higher standard of living than that enjoyed by the bulk of the population acquires an aura of virtue, a patina of righteousness. I have been wondering what to do about this ever since.

Twenty years ago I took to setting sixth formers this question: 'If Christ was born in somebody else's stable, was buried in somebody else's tomb and had nowhere to lay his head in between, is "getting

on'' a legitimate christian objective?' The majority answered that it is 'all right' to become rich if you do not break any of the commandments *en route*. This group presumably imagined that needles are quite large objects and camels very small creatures, so that all you need is a good eye, a steady hand and a not hypersensitive conscience. A second group said that the gospels teach that we must develop our talents. I still wonder how to explain succinctly the equivocation on the word 'talent'. The smallest group of all replied that we need to get on in order to be able to help other people. I would wryly contemplate the possibility of their being offered the chairmanship of the I.C.I. and eagerly accepting it only, of course, because of the many people this would enable them to benefit. This group, I suspected, was no longer able to be naked and unashamed about self-centred ambition, and had learned to run up a little apron from the fig leaves of pseudo-altruism.

Seven years ago, in another part of the country, I was to meet a different type of sixth former, in a class with scarcely an Ordinary Level to its corporate credit, trying, not very strenuously, to turn some C.S.E. grades into General Certificate of Education passes. In general they were very hostile to society as they saw it. This did not surprise me when I came to understand why they felt depressed and excluded. What did surprise me was that their resentment was directed at 'class' and 'privilege', and not at the capitalist system. They supported capitalism because they thought it gives one the opportunity to be rich. When in my contemporary history lessons I had to mention communism, I found them totally opposed to it. When I tried to point out that communism has its attractions, they challenged me to debate the matter before the whole of the first year Sixth. I did not dare decline, and so found myself the following week delivering an impassioned plea for Communism, while these alienated adolescents extolled private enterprise.

I am now temporarily teaching selected children again. The selection seems to me very accurate. I think that there are very few boys who come to our school, who do not have the ability to understand the material presented, who are not capable of absorbing the information and mastering the techniques required. In fact something over sixty per cent gain five or more Ordinary Levels. The failure of the rest, the failures of the sixty-odd in some of their subjects, is predominantly due, not to inability, not to their backgrounds, nor to emotional disorder, but to the fact that sustained attention, sustained accuracy and a careful absorption of data are uncongenial, often highly

uncongenial, and are therefore often abandoned. A partial answer to this is to make everything lively, entertaining and relevant. I wish I had the virtuosity to achieve this. At the same time, I know of no form of achievement which does not require a large degree of 'stickability'. If a pupil can only do a thing as long as it is entertaining, he or she will never achieve very much.

This leaves us with the problem of how to support them through what will frequently be drudgery, or at best less of an entertainment than the non-academic alternative. So parents, teachers, and even contrite elder brothers urge them to work so that they will 'get on', commonly employing terms of material self-interest as the argument most likely to be effective. This is not necessarily wrong. If it is true — I am not wholly sure that it is — that studying when young will bring you a higher income later on, then the pupil has a right to that information, and perhaps to be reminded of it. But should we call him a 'good' boy because he has the sense to do what will benefit himself? Is there anything morally good in being able to put aside present satisfaction for a larger satisfaction later? Does it deserve praise and prizes? Perhaps all self-control, perhaps the general ability to choose an objective and persevere with the means to it, is praiseworthy. Yet it seems to me that successful crime normally calls for self-discipline and tenacity of purpose. Do not prudence, industry and even temperance, qualify one for promotion in the service of mammon just as much as in the following of Christ? If so, let us not praise them indiscriminately.

Another way of stimulating and maintaining effort is by competition. I am told that competition plays a large role in jesuit pedagogical history. The early Jesuits were by the standards of their time, very mild disciplinarians and conspicuously reluctant to beat their pupils — an honourable tradition which the english and irish Jesuits have disgracefully betrayed — and so made much of competition.

I have barked my shins often enough on competition. I am interested in the phenomenon of adult games. Games seem to me a distinctively human activity in which we see man's creativity, in which we see him transcend normal relationships of cause and effect, invent new ones and even vary them. Thus in one game it is of the utmost seriousness to get the ball under the bar, and in another to get it over the bar. In one card game the ace may be high, in another low. In four years I have regularly tried to interest sixth formers in this analysis, running on every occasion into the same snag. According to the boys you play games for one reason only, to prove that you are better than someone

else. No! Not for the pleasure of deploying a skill, nor for the excitement or for the relaxation, but simply to beat someone else. I was not unprepared for this, even on the first occasion. I came with a question ready, a question I owe to Father Ralph Woodhall, 'Which do you enjoy more, a keen, intense game which you lose 5:4, or a game against a feeble team which you win very easily at 7:0?' I suspected that some of them would prefer the second, but I thought that they would be ashamed to admit it. My mistake! They all said they preferred the second. I turned to a gifted chess player in the class, 'If you were offered a game with the national champion, who would certainly beat you, or a game with an eleven-year-old novice, which would you choose?' He wasn't budging either. 'A chess player always wants to win', he said.

Now I have no doubt that he would prefer the chance of a game with a master to the unexciting prospect of beating a raw beginner. I also believe that some of the footballers would prefer to go down honourably to a very good team rather than have a walk-over against a very poor one. They were not admitting it, partly because they certainly hate to be beaten in argument no matter what position they have got themselves into, and partly because competition has, like 'getting on', its own spurious sanctity.

I very much dislike 'positions in class'. I am quite prepared to take a pupil answer by answer through his paper, telling him how well or otherwise he has dealt with each question. As a matter of principle I often do exactly that, and, except for paying deference to a principle, I am wasting my time. The boy cares little usually about what I say of his answers. There is one point that matters, 'what mark did I get?' When he knows this he can scurry back to his place, confer with his neighbours about their scores, and so estimate his own relative position. This is the real criterion of his performance, in comparison with which my painstaking dissection is largely irrelevant. So I often refuse to give any scores at all, to the quite explicit dissatisfaction of the class. 'Why can't we have our mark', they girn (cf *Oxford English Dictionary*). When I was much younger and had not yet acquired my now invariable habit of the oblique, tentative, tactful response, I replied angrily, 'I have been over your papers with everyone of you, telling you exactly how well you did each question. I am not interested in your little boys' game of places in class'. 'We are', they said, impenitently.

Competition is certainly a potent stimulant. I have seen the benefit of it in running debating and public speaking teams. I have seen boys

reach a standard in preparing for the Oxbridge awards which they would never have reached in routine 'A' level work, but I am often afraid that I am driving out the devil of inertia by the power of Beelzebub. One afternoon I was asking some sixth formers why man creates physical beauty, why he seeks not only utility, but aesthetic satisfaction. 'Why', I asked 'did our ancestors not content themselves with a practical jar, with an efficient bronze knife? Why did they decorate them with patterns?' One boy immediately suggested that this was a way of doing a thing better than someone else. You might not be able to produce a better jar, or a better knife, but if you decorated yours, you were one up. The origin of art, you see, is not to be sought in religion, in any aspiration after another dimension of the good, not even, *pace* Freud, in sex, nor even in spite of Marx, in the class struggle, but in the primordial battle to be one up on the Jones's. 'Life', commented one robust parent, 'is competitive'. I hate to contribute in the slightest to making that true. Cain, in my book, was the first competitor, before he was the first murderer.

Two years ago (we are approaching modern times), I climbed the terraces at St Beuno's to gaze once more upon the scene which had so often moved Gerard Manley Hopkins and myself. On the topmost terrace I blundered into a nun in the middle of her thirty days retreat. 'It's Paul Edwards', she exclaimed. 'Years ago you gave us a triduum. I remember you talking about the unbaptized regions of the mind, and most of the community being quite lost'. 'Unbaptized regions' are still quite a hobby of mine. I am obsessed by the fact that baptism, regular christian observance, even religious profession and the regular, conscientious discharge of one's routine duties as a religious, can leave, normally do leave, many of our attitudes, many of our principles and assumptions, and consequently the decisions and actions which flow from them, quite unchristianized, quite untouched by christian inspiration, quite uncriticized by christian criteria. Having spent so much of my life in the classroom, I am particularly interested in the christian educator and the 'unbaptized regions' of his or her mind. For instance, two conspicuous gospel virtues are forgivingness and humility. Are our schools outstanding for the forgiveness practised in them? Do we carry ourselves, conduct ourselves with an unmistakeable humility? I suggest to you that our classroom conduct, and I am not speaking of the odd outburst of spite, but about principles, has many an 'unbaptized region', some of them quite extensive. But the christian conduct of the teacher in the classroom is largely an individual matter. Here we are concerned with wider issues. I am

interested in what we are offering to do when we offer to educate anyone, and how we propose to do it. And I am very interested to know whether there are any 'unbaptized' areas here. When we accept a pupil are we promising him that if he co-operates with us he will have a fatter pay packet than he would otherwise have had, plus a hefty heave up the social ladder? Sometimes the pupils think so. Should they be disabused? Are we promising to turn them into seasoned competitors ready to do battle for promotion in the Great Darwinian Championship which is life? They may have grounds for thinking so if a headmaster's report and the school magazine are all about prizes, successes in competitive exams and competitive games and so on.

Would it be possible to state in a school prospectus:

> We try to help our pupils to attach a very low priority to material possessions beyond basic necessities, and to achieve a total indifference to matters of status.
>
> We want them to be able to criticize the society in which they live objectively, temperately, and if need be, ruthlessly.
>
> We would also like them to be able to estimate the many failures of the Church to be faithful to her founder, with clarity, honesty and an undisturbed spiritual poise.
>
> We want to help our pupils to take the centre of gravity of their lives, the centre of their thinking and wishing, out of themselves and replant it in God and their fellow human beings.

If a child of eleven knew that such were our aims, would he want to come to us? What proportion of catholic parents would be attracted by such a statement of intent? Would the ranks of our fellow clergy unanimously applaud?

May I go back to the sad case of the rich young man? Wealth in the ancient world, and in most periods of history, brought more than luxury to its owner. It normally meant that a lot of other people were dependent on him; it conferred rank, distinction, influence and often authority. Christ was not merely asking him to give up the appurtenances of colour supplement living, he was inviting him to strip himself of just those things which many people hope that education will bring them, status, distinction, power. 'Come, follow me', said Christ, because he had already taken the way of dispossession. Christ had no property; he had no status, being neither priest, nor elder, nor even a properly qualified scribe. You are all well aware that St Paul seems to sum up the whole salvific activity of Christ in the emptying of himself, a process to which has been given the label

kenosis, because Christ 'emptied' himself of his divinity, of human rank and accepted rejection, desertion, betrayal, condemnation and physical destruction.

It has come to mind while I have been composing this paper that we always used to be told that Lucifer was the greatest of the angels, that the contemplation of his own splendour begot in him a pride and rebelliousness from which springs all subsequent evil. Perhaps someone in this assembly can tell me how old this story is. Does it come from patristic times? I know that it was well established by the late middle ages. I think that this legend is of interest here, because it bears witness to a strong christian sense that obsession with one's own quality is morally destructive. The scripture, so far as I know, does not contain this story. It does attribute the Fall to Adam and Eve, the first status seekers — 'you shall be like gods' — and then to Cain, the first competitor.

Some time before the Second Vatican Council a group of Methodists asked me to talk to them about being a Jesuit. I tried to explain to them about the traditional vows and in my explanation made much use of the rich young man. I used him to expound what I now think of as the 'two tier view'. The young man was already leading a good life and was then offered the opportunity of a more intense dedication. Thus, most christians marry and are free to acquire property and as much independence as they can, while others are called to a 'higher life' (I doubt if I used that term even then) of poverty, chastity and obedience. I could not take this line any longer. *Kenosis*, self-emptying, seems to me now the salvific formula for every christian. What should this mean in ordinary, secular life? I am trying to find out, and as a teacher, I am very exercised, because on the face of it, *kenosis* seems to be the antithesis of education, which is normally understood to be an enriching process.

Allow me one more detour before I spike myself on that very pointed issue. If young Divitulus (I hope that that is a respectable diminutive) had walked away from his wealth as promptly as Simon and Company did from their nets and boats, his *kenosis* would still have been incomplete. That of the twelve certainly was. They wanted to know what return they would get for 'leaving all things'. James and John wanted to be First and Second Deputy Head. They had notions of rank and status which Christ had to correct by telling them all that the leader was to be the slave of everyone else. He then brought a snotty-nosed, ignorant urchin into the midst of them and told them to do their best to climb up to that level.

Now many a member of a religious congregation has, after the first act of *kenosis*, their religious profession, gone on not, apparently, to further 'self-emptying', but to enrichment. They have sometimes received a better education, travelled more widely, acquired more 'culture', been given greater responsibility, enjoyed a wider reputation and greater social acceptability than their lay peers of equal potentiality. I think that this was more common in the days when education was less available and social mobility rarer. Although wealth commonly brings status, distinction and power, to waive wealth is not necessarily to close all roads to their achievement. And I notice that twice in this paragraph I have automatically spoken of education as the principal route to self-advancement.

It is now high time that I stopped sidling round the bush and started grasping some of the nettles I have previously planted and carefully watered. Do I, because of my convictions about *kenosis*, want all christians to be ignorant, coarse, callow and incompetent? Do I want them to be highly educated when I keep on nagging about how this brings status, distinction and power? My answer is that education ideally conducted is a profoundly humbling process. To progress in knowledge is to grow in the realization of one's ignorance, to learn how much there is to know, how much one does not know, and, most humiliating, how much one will never know. Have we not all experienced this humiliation at some time or other? And have we not all, at some time or other, felt a little vain about the knowledge we do have? Have we not all met learned men who were plainly humble and clever men who were markedly arrogant? One of the things I do not know, perhaps will never know, is the causative factor operating here. Why does knowledge produce humility in one and complacency in another?

For so many students knowledge is something which they take a small piece of, in order to fashion themselves an admission ticket to some profession, or to promotion within it. This seems to me nothing less than blasphemy, in the first place against truth itself, and secondly against the whole process of patient observation, laborious cogitation and inspired intuition by which man has acquired that knowledge. Something similar, namely rare inspiration, magnificent technique and meticulous effort went into the production of all great art. Consequently, to appreciate a poem, a painting, a piece of music is to feel petty, puny and clumsy before greatness, genius and virtuosity. The aesthetic experience is not an agreeable titillation; it is profoundly moving, deeply disturbing and always humbling. Yet it is possible to

turn some knowledge of the arts into a minor personal embellishment, one of the marks of a gentleman, a badge of cultural superiority, one of the lesser aspects of colour supplement living. This also is an execrable blasphemy.

I spend a lot of time and eloquence (I hope eloquence!) trying to persuade boys to interest themselves in the craft of expression, in having a wide range of vocabulary and phrase, in being able to fit their voices and gestures to what they want to convey. Again this is a very humbling study. Start using a dictionary and you are face to face with the impossibility of ever knowing your own language. Try to write or speak effectively and you are humiliated by the inadequacy of your imagination and the defects of your technique. But training speakers is a risky business. Sometimes one awakens a distressing exhibitionism. Let someone see that he can hold an audience and he may become addicted to doing so. The whole art of presentation then becomes a vehicle for self display. This is a vicious abuse of the transcendent power of the human word.

When I had more to do with the organization of the school I wanted the disappearance of the 'prefects'. I did not want to see the work disappear. I certainly wanted the oldest boys, all of them, to give a hand in the running of the school, preventing bullying, stopping destruction and helping children who had hurt themselves. I wanted the 'prefecting', if you like, to go on, and the prefect as a member of a special class, with a badge, his name in the first pages of the school diary and the general air of having 'made it', to disappear. I wanted the oldest boys to be aware of the needs of the school, aware of the contribution they could make; I wanted them to see themselves as helping the youngsters rather than bossing them. I failed. The list stayed in the front of the calendar, the badges continued, and most prefects, it seemed to me, thought of themselves as having rank, as having power, as being 'able to put it on their UCCA forms'. And because nothing is free, they had to pay for this by doing certain chores. The conscientious did them faithfully and the less conscientious skimped them. This is not the christian concept of responsibility, of service, of subordinating oneself to the needs of others. It is a caste system mitigated by the principle of *noblesse oblige*.

Therefore, while education enriches, producing knowledge, understanding, appreciation, the power of expression and the experience of responsibility, it remains an apt instrument of *kenosis*. How can we ensure that it is used to that end? At least we should watch our products. We should watch our techniques, our school institutions

and the motives we propose. And who will watch us? Are we ourselves wholly untainted by the old leaven of careerism? Are we all seasoned adepts in *kenosis*?

There is a further difficulty. Education is not a process taking place in one direction only. It is part of the teacher's concern for knowledge and understanding, a part of the classroom practice of humility, that he should be willing to learn from his pupils. In doing so he exposes himself to some very undesirable influences. In a materialistic society he is going to breathe an atmosphere of materialism. In a snobbish society, be the snobbery social, intellectual or inverted, he will be exposed to catching it. In a society in which sport receives an irrationally disproportionate amount of attention, he will, perhaps, become obsessed by the performance of Celtic or the progress of the Oxford boat. (The juxtaposition is deliberate and malicious.) And there is careerism. How does the missionary prevent himself from becoming partly pagan?

Now to grasp the last of my nettles, or of this particular batch of them. Pupils come to you of their own choice, or are sent by parents or some other authority. Does this mean that the pupils, or their parents, or society already accept the values you are hoping to communicate? Are you then teaching the already converted? What happens when parents or society do not have our ideals? Do we try to conceal them? Do we try to get them through as part of a package deal because the rest of the package is valued? Will the materialistic and the ambitious send children to us hoping that they will be quite capable of taking the valuable knowledge, while remaining immune to our ideals? They could find some quite convincing evidence for believing in the possibility. I repeat a former question, 'What are we offering to do?' Is it only the converted who will want it?

One last word; having described the frank reaction of various pupils on the subject of wealth and competition, I am afraid that I may be leaving you with a poor impression of the boys of our school and of the affectiveness of our moral catechesis among them. Our boys may be more direct in their admissions of materialism and careerism than is common. I doubt if they are especially subject to these vices. Five of the most gifted pupils I have ever taught, all of them, now I come to think of it, Oxbridge graduates, turned their backs quite decisively on the 'glittering prizes' to work for the third world or juvenile offenders or deprived children. Another boy, the best boy speaker I have known, a very serious and energetic student, but with a robust sense of humour, went to the London School of Economics. There on

the first day of his final exams he burned his books in the middle of the street and went home. I grant you that the wisdom of such a proceeding is quite debatable and I hope that when we hold the General Certificate of Education trials next month we shall not lose all our textbooks in a rather dangerous holocaust. At the same time I find his gesture very admirable in its courage, in its eloquent scorn, in its prophetic quality. I say prophetic, because it reminds me of the acted parables of the Old Testament. So might Jeremiah or Ezechiel have expressed themselves with some such gesture of uncompromising repudiation.

One can scarcely hope to train prophets; prophecy is wholly a charism, is it not? Can one even foster the charism? Yet what have we more need of than prophets with their absorption in God and in the people to whom they must deliver his message, forgetful of themselves, careless of their own comfort, undaunted by rejection, wholly committed, the antithesis of the careerist?