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Abstract

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A Review Essay by Dirk Windhorst, Redeemer University College.

Blomberg, Doug. (2007). *Wisdom and curriculum: Christian schooling*after *postmodernity*. Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2007. 256 pp. (paperback). ISBN-10: 093291473X; ISBN-13: 9780932914736.

This essay reviews Doug Blomberg's *Wisdom and Curriculum* and responds to various issues raised there. It highlights the value of wisdom in terms of its relationship to embodied practical knowledge and the norms embedded in God's creation. The concluding comments take issue with Blomberg's interpretation of Plato.

Wisdom and Curriculum calls Christian educators back to their divinely appointed task: to nurture the development of wisdom in students. It is a wisdom that examines the normative structure of God's creation and that seeks to realize the multiplicity of these norms in concrete experience and embodied action. In wisdom, knowing the right thing to do in a specific situation is seamlessly wedded to the desire and the tendency to do it. To know is to do– there are no walls separating cognition, affect, will, and sensorimotor activity from each other. By binding knowledge to action, wisdom forms character. If one aims primarily at knowledge, Blomberg implies, then one will not only lose wisdom, but knowledge as well: "(Christian) schools are not to be in the 'knowledge business,' but in unrelenting pursuit of wisdom, the formation of character. Knowledge does not yield wisdom, information does not guarantee formation" (p. 162).

Reading *Wisdom and Curriculum* evoked the following memory: A boy was barely passing Grade 8 in a Christian elementary school. The principal told his parents that based on the boy's poor academic performance, he would never amount to much. Despite this dire prediction, the parents saw something in their son which the principal had missed. They had seen him work in the family business (wholesale florists), and it did not surprise them when he eventually took over management of the firm. When he hired me on as vacation relief one summer, he taught me his sales route by putting me in the driver's seat right away. I was forced to pay attention to the route by experiencing it first-hand, not second-hand in the passenger's seat, or third-hand through written directions. This boy had grown into a man who seemed wiser than his former principal. Similarly, Doug Blomberg gives the example of Bob Clifford, a leading engineering entrepreneur, who failed at school yet succeeded in the "real" world where practical thinking is often rewarded. Blomberg argues for a type of school where "first-hand learning" is given its due.

Educating for this full-bodied holistic wisdom means that abstract theory must be pulled down from the privileged place it has held in the history of Western schooling. Its relationship to concrete practice and bodily experience must be re-conceived in Christian education as well, for it is within a tradition that has separated mind from body and fact from value. As Blomberg reminds us, "the history of Christianity would have been quite different if the incarnation of Christ and his and our bodily resurrection …had been treated with full seriousness" (p. 157). Christ was not a Greek philosopher who denigrated physical work: He was a Jewish carpenter, and his first disciples were fishermen. Yet, more often than not, Christian schools send a clear message to students and parents alike: the theoretical professions have greater value than the practical trades.

Blomberg is not espousing a European model where children are streamed much earlier into professional or vocational tracks. Rather, he is arguing that for all students at every level of schooling the connection between theory and practice, thinking and doing, should be nurtured and strengthened. In

the same fashion, Simone Weil, a French Christian thinker who died during the Second World War at the age of 34, believed that wisdom emerged in the reciprocal relation between thought and action. For example, like many Marxists she was appalled by the joyless labour experienced by factory workers. However, instead of theorizing from an academic distance, she plunged into factory work as an anonymous labourer, striving to understand first-hand the life of the working class, looking for ways to make work less oppressive and more joyful. In her view, schooling had a crucial role to play in effecting these changes, but it had to be completely re-conceived: "Not that the level of theoretic studies must be lowered; rather, the contrary. More should be done to excite intelligence to wakefulness, but at the same time teaching must itself become more concrete" (Weil, 1942/1977, p. 71). Practice informs theory as much as theory guides practice. Students become better thinkers when they define and deal with problems that mean something to them, that connect to their experience. By the same token, thoughts that are not tested in practice have little value.

In the education and practice of wisdom, students develop a better understanding of the values or norms inherent in God's creation, while at the same time, they become agents of change by making those values or norms more real. Blomberg defines wisdom as the realization of values in this double sense. This definition has its roots in the work of Nicholas Maxwell (n. d.), a philosopher of science who has been arguing for over twenty years that wisdom rather than knowledge is the proper end of academic inquiry – both in the humanities and in the sciences

Over the same period, a number of psychologists have attempted to build a construct of wisdom that can be operationalized and tested in empirical research (Sternberg, 1990; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005). I find it intriguing that researchers trained in a modern paradigm of knowledge are attracted to a word that resonates with ancient conceptions of virtue. The two most prominent groups of researchers (the one headed by Robert Sternberg in the United States and the other headed by Paul Baltes in Germany) seem to agree with Blomberg that wisdom is rooted more strongly in practical experience than in theoretical knowledge.

The chapters in *Wisdom and Curriculum* alternate between regular exposition and dialogue. In one chapter, the principal of a school is interviewed by a visitor intrigued by the school's "integral" curriculum. In another, an imaginary conversation on wisdom occurs with Sophie (a teacher), Solomon, and Socrates. Two of the chapters highlight staff room discussions in educational philosophy. Even though there are times when it seems a bit contrived (the conversations among teachers sound more like graduate seminars than any staff room discussions that I have witnessed), I appreciate Blomberg's attempt to use dialogue for communicating ideas.

Our minds have been so deeply formed by an academic model of education that it is difficult to imagine concretely Blomberg's conception of wisdom in education. I would have liked more "on-the-ground" descriptions of Mount Evelyn, the Australian Christian school featured in this book. The illustrations drawn from Mount Evelyn's "integral" curriculum create as many questions as they answer. For example, Grade 10 students go on annual three-week field trip to central Australia to connect with Aboriginal people. Is it the length of the trip that makes it more educationally meaningfully then the typical school outing? What type of planning goes into such a venture? It whets the reader's appetite. One wants to know more. Perhaps the vagueness is deliberate: Since each school is situated in its own time and place, curriculum reform must be thought through and tried out from the ground up, using and adapting itself to local conditions. The closest Blomberg comes to providing a recipe is the "play/problem posing/purposeful response" curricular model elaborated in the final chapter. This model has been adapted by the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (Canada) in their most curriculum development work. Nevertheless, a case study of Mount Evelyn could serve as a companion volume to *Wisdom and Curriculum,* allowing astute readers to get a clearer picture of Blomberg's vision for education without necessarily attempting to replicate a North American version of Mount Evelyn. In the same way, John Dewey's educational ideas are better understood after one has read *The Dewey School*(Mayhew & Edwards, 1936) in which concrete practices are described by the very teachers who had been "on the ground" working

with children and developing curriculum "on the go".

Blomberg draws on many sources. Of course, the wisdom literature of the Bible–particularly Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job–plays a large role, and his Biblical world view has deep roots in the Dutch Reformational tradition. (Thirty years ago in his first doctoral dissertation, Blomberg applied Hermann Dooyeweerd's philosophy to curriculum development, and one can hear echoes of Dooyeweerd's modal aspects of reality in this book–the ethical, lingual, aesthetic, confessional, etc.) One chapter engages the ideas of a post-modern curricular theorist, W. E. Doll Jr. And, as Blomberg freely admits, the emphasis on experience in education resonates well with the pragmatism of John Dewey.

I particularly appreciate the way Blomberg connects love and justice to wisdom. By developing wisdom in students as they bounce between the two pillars of theory and practice–thinking and doing, reflecting and acting, contemplating and experiencing–each student's unique combination of gifts and abilities is given its due: The aim is that everyone finds a place to learn. The affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains dissolve into a seamless whole. Loving and knowing are not separate activities; on the contrary, they depend on each other, illuminate each other, and make each other grow. Just as loving attention inhabits every good human relationship, so it should reside among all that is human and non-human in God's creation. Blomberg expresses this beautifully:

> Though the impersonal objects of our acts of knowing may not be conscious of our attention, being in a right relationship with them is still a condition for our knowing them. The order of this relationship is better described by a spatial metaphor–like "understanding" (standing under)–than in terms of a rational "grasp" of the essence of things. (p. 89)

Blomberg has very little good to say about Plato. He lays at the feet of Plato just about everything that ails modern education, especially the triumph of theory over practice. Why? "It is just that Plato thought the True–and the Good and the Beautiful–were abstract entities to be approached through abstract thought. But value–nor truth, for that matter–is not a quality attaching solely to propositions" (p. 211). This interpretation of Plato is very much in vogue these days, and Blomberg's disparagement of Plato's theory of timeless, unchanging forms seems to make so much sense: any attempt to imagine them often results in a fantasy that appears boring or ridiculous in comparison to the dynamic of ever-changing events, events that are inextricably situated within a spatial and temporal network of shifting relations–the arena where wisdom is developed. Yet, did Plato imagine the forms as abstract concepts in the current sense of the term, i.e. as derived from the concrete? Clearly not. The forms were beyond sensation *and* imagination. If one tried to imagine them, then one was going in the wrong direction. All one could hope for were fleeting glimpses of beauty and truth, signposts in the concrete world that pointed to an invisible reality on which the concrete world depended. Perhaps Plato's forms are closer to Blomberg's norms than he is willing to admit.

Blomberg's antipathy to Plato is clearly displayed in chapter four where Sophie, Solomon, and Socrates argue about wisdom. Despite his caveat that Solomon and Socrates are "caricatures", the latter is a straw man that is too easily knocked down. For those of us who read the *Republic* with sympathy (as I do), Socrates seems closer to the wisdom of Jesus Christ than Solomon who seemed to lose wisdom as he grew older. When I read the *Republic* for the first time over thirty years ago, I was amazed that someone who had lived before the birth of Jesus was able to anticipate Christ in outline form–the just person who suffers from an evil reputation is in a better position than an unjust person who enjoys a good reputation. It is not too farfetched to read the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus as simultaneous submissions to the necessity of social order and to a love of justice which transcended social norms.

George Grant (1982) once remarked that we moderns find it extremely difficult to understand the *Republic* "because most German and English scholars have, for the past two centuries, read it through Kantian eyes (a great darkening) and Catholics through Aristotelian eyes (better, but still a darkening)" (p. 108). If this is true, then one way to remove the Kantian lenses might be to read the *Republic* primarily as a work of psychology. Reading it as political theory can easily obscure the

main thrust of this classic work. Plato has Socrates and his friends constructing in their minds an ideal society in order to describe in "large letters" the soul (psyche) of a just person. Justice is the principle of harmony that orders the desires of the soul in a right relationship to each other. Each desire finds that for which it is best fitted. Inasmuch as the soul participates in the Good beyond being (or, to use Christian language, the God beyond creation), so far is it imbued with justice. In my view, Plato's conception of justice is closer to Christian love than it is to Rawls' (1971) theory of justice which is derived from Kantian notions of reason as "enlightened" self-interest.

It is beyond the scope of this review to elaborate further my disagreement with Blomberg on Plato. But it does not hold me back from heartily recommending this book to anyone interested in having another look at the foundations of Christian education. It would serve as an excellent text in a graduate course on curriculum.

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