This is a pre-copyrighted, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Journal of Education and Christian Belief following peer review. The version of record is available at:

Title: Secular Social Theory and Christian Schools

Author: Dr. Elizabeth Green

Abstract

This article argues that Christian educators should be aware of the way that Christian beliefs interact with the structure and practices of secular education policies and that engaging with established secular social theory can help them to do this. Drawing on an example from empirical research carried out in the new Academies in the United Kingdom the author models how concepts associated with Bourdieu's social theory can illuminate the cultural impact of Christian worldview on students. The article concludes that this type of engagement counters the marginalization of religion within sociology of education research.

Introduction

Teachers and lecturers in the social sciences will be familiar with the task of building bridges between theory and practice. Enabling students to relate the way that they conceptualise the social and cultural world to the ways in which they act, teach and learn within it is a central part of the educational task. Creating and critiquing theoretical frameworks that abstract the social construction of education and culture and going forth to test them in the real world is the business of sociology of education research. Yet if we believe that God's revelation in the person of Jesus can redeem our ways of seeing, acting, knowing and learning in the created order by placing God firmly at the centre rather than the self where does this leave the Christian educator in relation to mainstream social theory? Opening this up might appear to place the Christian educator in opposition to many of the conceptual frameworks and social theories currently employed in educational sociology. It is not this author's intention

1

to set up a straw man. Many Christian educational practitioners use well established social theory in their work and are able to navigate the tension between worldviews and their attendant assumptions, if not with ease at least with a commitment to being critically aware. This suggests that it is not inconsistent to engage both in the contextualisation and interpretation made possible by social theory and to desire to be faithful to Biblical truth.

In the context of religious education Cooling (2005) contrasts what he describes as a 'fix and transmit' view of education with the 'contextualise and transform' approach (p.91-92). Fix and transmit education is designed to simply re-programme the secular, contextualise and transform seeks to take account of context and interpretation in the discovery of truth. Goheen (2007) also advocates critical participation as the proper stance for the Christian with regard to cultural context. This author assumes a similar critical realist perspective with reference to how we know, interpret and engage with the social world. The aim of this article is to explore an attempt to engage critically as a Christian with a secular social theory, that of Pierre Bourdieu. The case will be made that Bourdieu offers a helpful way to analyse the cultural impact on students of a new type of institution of Christian education in the United Kingdom: new Academies sponsored by a variety of Christian churches, foundations and individuals. The article will argue that Christians should be aware of the way that Christian beliefs interact with the structure and processes of secular education policies and other worldviews in the new Academies and that engaging with secular social theory helps them to do this. It is the belief of the author that engaging as a Christian with well established social theory, even when it is firmly situated in a neo-Marxist worldview,

is essential to ensure that religion is rehabilitated as a significant space within mainstream educational sociology on a par with class, race and gender.

The Context of Educational Sociology in the United Kingdom

Significant work has been done situating analysis, particularly with regard to educational classification and social reproduction, in the context of class, race and gender (see for example Reay, 1998, McCleod, J, 2005) the same cannot be said for religion. Quoting Berger, Grace argues that modern sociology operates within a 'secularisation of consciousness paradigm' (Berger, 1973 cited in Grace, 2004, p.74). He points out that the omission of religion from sociological analysis limits the scope and depth of intellectual enquiry, presents an over-simplification of 'social relations in the Modern West' and is entirely inappropriate for many international educational and social contexts (p. 47). Despite critical work exposing the myth of global secularisation theory, the tendency to regard Christianity as merely a step towards modernity and post-modernity persists in theoretical approaches widely employed in sociology, anthropology and educational sociology. Cannel (2006) argues that we have Durkheim and Weber to thank for this teleological narrative and that much current work is predicated on the assumption that we now know all there is to know about Christianity. Cannel also points out that the startling exception to this neglectful approach has been an explosion of research interest in religious fundamentalism. This primarily focuses on the impact of Islam and it tends to conceptualise fundamentalist religion, to adopt Susan Harding's (1991) description, as liberalism's 'repugnant social other'. Such is the broader context of educational sociology in the United Kingdom.

3

Why Bourdieu?

Given that Bourdieu believed that the primary function of religion was the preservation of social order and that it was in decline one could quite possibly conclude that he has nothing to offer a sympathetic analysis of the impact of Christian worldview on educational culture and move on. Nevertheless sociologists and students of religion persist in using Bourdieu's concepts in their analysis of religion and its impact on the social world (Rey, 2004). This is because his theory is adept at probing the relationship between structure and process in institutional culture. Local Christian practice is located in the interplay between these relationships. Lawrence (1998) points out that 'organisation' is not a neutral phenomenon and that a Christian organisational framework is not innately present merely because a school carries out a Christian educational purpose (p.115). Mills (2003) argues that 'school cultures are generally reflective of existing' social, political and ideological frameworks and suggests that 'Western capitalism and its associated structural inequalities may also be apparent in the culture of Christian schools' (p.131). Bourdieu's concepts are well suited to rendering visible these deeply rooted assumptions and dispositions which habitually inform our practice and are structurally reproduced in our culture. Employing Bourdieu's theory may well mean facing the extent to which we have recovered the 'unbearable tension' (Goheen, 2007) of being in the world and not of it. There is always the possibility that our Christian school cultures may become complicit with the structural and social sin of our age.

Two major studies of Catholic education use Bourdieu's theory in this way. Angus (1988) used perspectives from Bourdieu to investigate the nature of religious identity as a conserving force in a Christian Brothers College in Australia. He explored this

identity in relationship to wider social change in Australian society together with the theological responses of the Second Vatican Council. His aim was to explain how interaction between structure and practice can produce an apparently stable and particular set of meanings in school which are in reality much more open to transformation and change through the actions of small groups of participants than they appear (p.180). In a study of contemporary Catholic education in England Grace (2002) researched the interaction of Catholic ethos and faith, which he termed 'Catholicity', with the structures of the educational 'marketplace' particularly in terms of Catholic school identity and leadership. He concluded that in resisting the pressures of the marketplace and secularisation Catholic school leaders had religious and spiritual resources to draw upon which were located in this sense of 'Catholicity'. He pointed out, however, that these were severely tested by the dilution of some traditional aspects of Catholic identity, particularly an increase in the number of educational leaders drawn from the laity as opposed to religious orders.

Overview of Bourdieu's Concepts

Bourdieu's theory equips education research with a set of concepts designed to make visible the complex relationships between worldview assumptions, institutional structures and power in the social space. Bourdieu's social analysis assumes that being situated in culture subconsciously regulates our assumptions, relationships and values and reproduces them in our social practice. He used the concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' to analyse these assumptions and 'cultural capital' and 'symbolic power' to account for their impact. Bourdieu is best known for his extensive analysis of the French academic system, the Académe. He exposed structural practices which belied

the apparent rhetoric of the meritocracy and restricted access and achievement to members of the traditional social elites in France (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu used the concept of 'field' to define the dimensions of the social space. It is widely assumed in educational research that there will be contestation arising from the interaction of different habitus in the field and because of competition for position and cultural validation. There is a lot of discussion in the literature about whether Bourdieu equated habitus with ethos and it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore this (see Smith, 2003, for further discussion), however the concept of habitus within Bourdieu's work is very much connected with the idea of worldview particularly in the context of religion. Definitions of Bourdieu's concepts have to be held loosely because they are meant to be adaptable tools and because Bourdieu's own conceptual definitions evolve throughout his work (reference removed to preserve anonymity). Nevertheless Rey (2004) writes that Bourdieu understood the religious habitus to be 'the specifically religious dimension of an individual agent's habitus that manifests itself most apparently, though not exclusively, in the religious field' (p.337). Habitus is potentially a very helpful way to analyse the way that Christian assumptions and dispositions impact institutional culture and practice.

Bourdieu and a colleague J-P Passeron undertook two surveys to explore the personal and social characteristics of philosophy and sociology students at the University of Lille (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). These were carried out in the academic years 1961- 2 and 1962 – 3. They explored the extent to which the characteristics of students, stemming from their habitus, had an exchange value which conferred positional advantage in the social space. This challenged the notion of culture as

something universal with its own intrinsic value. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital conveys the idea that cultural practices can have value and confer power in the social space. Bourdieu's designation of all culture as arbitrary, however, is problematic for Christians because it shores up the trend in educational research to relativise all worldviews and ways of knowing. Whilst this reading of culture has become institutionalised in educational research there are in fact competing understandings of the cultural capital concept in Bourdieu's work. Moore (2004) has argued convincingly that Bourdieu does assume the existence of universal principles and ways of knowing and these are held in tension in his work. Bourdieu draws on the idea of culture being arbitrary when he attempts to account for difference in educational achievements between social groups, but he draws on the idea of universal knowledge when he explores difference *within* groups. It isn't necessary here to summarise all of the considerable debate around this (for more detail see Beck, 2007 and reference removed to preserve anonymity) but it is important to stress the persistence of this as an alternate way of reading culture. It suggests that Bourdieu's concepts can be de-coupled from a relativist reading and applied in a critical realist framework; they can be expanded from a narrow exchange model to focus on the analysis of religious habitus within its own terms.

Rey (2005) argues that the important outcome of Bourdieu and Passeron's study was that it showed that 'social exclusion is a continuous struggle' and can't be rectified by simply acquiring a Culture, with a capital C (p. 23). Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic power' is used to explore why certain forms of cultural capital have more value within institutions than others. It tracks the exercise of power within the institution and explores how certain practices are legitimated to validate and control the

accumulation of cultural capital within the field. In the United Kingdom Bourdieu's

concepts have been most widely employed in school choice research to account for

the ways in which middle class parents appear to be able to make use of their cultural

capital to gain positional advantage (Ball and Vincent, 1998). Beck (2007) has been

very critical, claiming that such work is moralistic and demonises the individual

choices of parents. The relationship between educational policy, institutional

structures and individual choice are complex but as a Christian this author would want

to commend research that is motivated by a concern for social justice and issues of

access to education for the socially marginalised. More importantly it would seem,

from a Christian perspective, that the concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power

may have space within them to be realistic about the existence and effects of

structural sin within institutions.

Applying Bourdieu to researching Academies in England

Academies were a central part of New Labour's education policy. They were in effect

an extension of a Conservative government policy which established City Technology

Colleges (CTC) in areas of urban deprivation. CTCs and Academies have independent

status but receive per capita funding; they are sponsored by business, philanthropists

and by Christian churches and Christian charitable foundations. Academies have a

curriculum specialism; thus far business and enterprise dominate amongst the

specialisms. New Labour was committed to opening 400 new Academies by 2010

(Gillie & Bolton, 2010). There were 200 Academies open in the previous academic

year 2009/10, 53 of these had a faith designation, all Christian[1]. The Church of

England sponsored 19 Academies; the Catholic Church sponsored 2 and 1 Academy

was jointly sponsored by the Church of England and the Catholic Church. The

remainder was sponsored by Christian charitable foundations such as Oasis, the Grace Foundation and the Emmanuel Schools Foundation. All of the Christian Academies open in 2009/10 had business and/or enterprise designated as a specialism. The present Coalition government in the United Kingdom continues to support the expansion of Academies and their sponsorship by religious groups. The policy has generated fierce public and academic debate. General questions about equity, funding and the decline of the common school have been as controversial as the more specific concern about state funding for religious schools in view of the perceived rise in religious terrorism and sectarianism.

At a policy level Bourdieu's theory has already been applied to the analysis of Academies as a sector upon educational performance, the market and parental choice. To give just one example Woods et al (2007) used Bourdieu's concepts to map the entrepreneurial features of Academies and the impact of enterprise as a habitus in Academies on the sector and on wider discourse within education policy. They concluded that although there were competing understandings of entrepreneurship within Academies such as public entrepreneurship, business models were a strong 'normalising presence' (p.327). They argued that 'the emerging pattern of participation in the academies programme suggests that existing structural advantages in the fields of business and the church are being replicated and strengthened, and so academies are predominantly being constructed as sites intended to enhance the growing influence of private versions of entrepreneurialism' (p. 237).

Much fruitful research could be carried out around the idea of how Christian habitus and cultural capital confers structural advantage. Many Christian Academy sponsors

would argue that they are 'lights on a hill' holding out a model of positive social cohesion and cultural engagement and this should be researched. More work also needs to be done on the interaction between enterprise as an ideology and Christian worldview in the local context of each Academy (see reference removed to preserve anonymity). The aim of this paper, however, is to de-couple Bourdieu's concepts from the conflictual and economistic and demonstrate that they can be used to analyse the impact of a Christian worldview upon the culture of students within those institutions. This holds faithful to the argument made at the beginning of this paper that we must challenge the assumption that we know all there is to know about local Christian practice. One of the ways of doing this is to use Bourdieu's concepts to take seriously the religious beliefs of participants within the new Academies as we analyse their cultural experience.

An example from empirical research in a Christian CTC and Academies

The aim in this section of the paper is to provide an example of how Bourdieu's concepts were used in the context of empirical research to illustrate engagement with the theory rather than to discuss the research and its findings in any depth.

The author's doctoral research comprised the first ethnographic study in the UK of a CTC and Academies sponsored by a Christian foundation (reference removed to preserve anonymity). Fieldwork was carried out between January and June of 2007 and comprised ethnographic observation of formal and informal settings, documentary analysis and interviews. In 2007 the Foundation sponsored one CTC and two Academies. Whilst the CTC was a new school, both the Academies replaced existing local authority schools and so staff and students from the previous schools

were transferred into the new Academies, this is a very common situation when new Academies are created. The Foundation were very clear that they intended to 'provide for the advancement of education within a broadly based Christian ethos' (Mission statement, 2007) and the most significant mechanisms for the delivery of this were Christian religious education, a daily Christian assembly and the teaching of Biblical values and morality. The focus of the research was first, to investigate and describe the Christian worldview of the sponsor and senior team in the Foundation; second, to track how it framed the 'broadly-based Christian ethos' and Bible teaching in the curriculum and third, to investigate what impact this had on the culture of students.

It quickly became apparent that the sponsor and senior leadership within the Foundation shared a Christian worldview, with the exception of one or two senior management team members in the Academies who had been appointed from the previous schools. They broadly shared a range of theological perspectives which could be described as reformed Protestant, although one senior team member attended a charismatic church. The evidence of this was primarily active church membership and a shared Christian heritage. Participants attended evangelical Anglican churches, Presbyterian and other non-conformist evangelical churches, did Bible study together and had belonged to the Christian union at University and read books by authors such as Nancy Pearcey[2]. This shared worldview and network of Christian experiences were conceptualised as a habitus within the analytical framework of the research. Within the study a lot of time was devoted to gathering evidence to accurately describe the beliefs and assumptions which underpinned the religious habitus.

Reformed theological scholarship often frames the Christian worldview using key Biblical narratives of creation, fall, redemption and new creation (Schaeffer, 1972). After initial documentary analysis and interviews with the senior team an account was generated to describe how the team related their assumptions about creation, fall, redemption and new creation explicitly to the following structures in the CTC and Academies: curriculum, pastoral care, administration, physical aspects (such as the site, uniform etc.) and in professional relationships. Whilst it was important to track the impact of explicit assumptions, the concept of habitus implies that our sub-conscious assumptions and dispositions have a more powerful and regulating effect on cultural encounters between structure and processes. Drawing on Carson's (2008) description of the Biblical narratives as the 'great turning points of redemptive history' and 'the non-negotiables of biblical theology' a set of analytical codes were developed so that *implicit* evidence could also be collected and impact of the religious habitus tracked. Just to give a brief example, the author has argued elsewhere that discipline within the Foundation schools is an area where the *implicit* impact of habitus is significant (reference removed to preserve anonymity). Strict discipline and a high emphasis on appropriate dress and conduct are common in the new Academies (Paton, 2007) regardless of whether they have a religious designation. Discipline, socialisation and the reproduction of dispositions and norms are also central features of Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives. Without any analysis of Christian beliefs and assumptions about the nature of man and the nature of God an account of discipline within the CTC and Academies could be potentially very negatively biased towards structural manifests of power and control.

Another way to track the impact of the religious habitus was to explore what kind of Christian practices had cultural value within the CTC and Academies. For example, Bible teaching was a high status activity and this corresponded to beliefs about the authority of scripture which were found within the religious habitus. Acquiring Biblical literacy was a form of acquiring cultural capital for staff and students. Only staff members who shared the religious habitus taught the Bible in assemblies and in RE. This conferred symbolic power upon those staff members in the sense that their shared assumptions and beliefs regulated the way that the Bible was presented. Again this is discussed in full elsewhere (reference removed to preserve anonymity) but the study found that students privileged being informed about Bible teaching on ethics and morality even if they said that they were not Christians. At one level this would seem to fall short of the desire expressed by many senior staff that students would have a real and living encounter with the Lord Jesus and experience conversion. On the other hand it corresponds to the assumption in the religious habitus that it is their responsibility as Christians to teach the Bible and it is the Holy Spirit's work to convict of sin and that this might happen later in life and not while a student is at school. Bourdieu argued that actors were able to re-appropriate aspects of the habitus without fundamentally challenging it. As students assigned value to Biblical literacy they were partly re-appropriating an assumption of the religious habitus without challenging the dominance of the habitus, but without becoming convinced of Biblical truth either. The study examined this in great depth and it argues that the interaction of structures and practices help to explain this outcome. One such interaction will be examined briefly here through two key findings. First, The Bible was not taught in the wider subject curriculum. This sent out a particular message to students: that the Bible wasn't relevant to those subjects, nor to their own experience outside of school.

Second, the Bible teaching was almost exclusively delivered in a modernist apologetics framework so that students were asked to weigh up its claims and decide whether or not it was true. One could, therefore, argue that in privileging knowledge about the Bible and deciding it wasn't true students were doing just what was expected of them. The secular subject curriculum was interacting with student practices, the re-appropriation of cultural-capital, to accentuate one *implicit* disposition of the habitus which is the emphasis on *personal* conversion, decision making and accountability. There isn't space to explore this in this paper and this research is only being cited as an example, but assumptions about personal accountability and decision making also stemmed from a traditional pedagogic view of education and a neo-conservative political ideology which were in evidence within the field. The study raises an issue therefore about how religious habitus interacts with other habitus in the field such as politics and ideology.

In Summary: the potential of Bourdieu's concepts

Bourdieu's main critics argue that his concepts generate too clinical an account of cultural experience and that his theory is reductionist and deterministic, offering no way out of the game of culture. Part of the problem is the extent to which clinical and reductionist approaches have been institutionalised in sociology of education research. Bourdieu's tools have the potential to be a very flexible yet rigorous way to engage in real world hermeneutic work. This is because they continually explore context, layers of meaning and interpretation and rigorously seek to hold these complex dimensions together in analysis. As this paper suggests, to apply Bourdieu's concepts is not necessarily to relativise all cultural meaning or all religious truth. Habitus, cultural capital and symbolic power enable Christians to be realistic about the cultural settings

within which schools and their students function. They potentially provide a more nuanced way for schools to reflect on the interaction between Christian habitus and structure that in practice regulate student culture. This kind of analysis and reflection on practice is necessary before structures can be re-designed to fully support the kind of cultural formation Christian schools are seeking. Furthermore, it is important that Christian researchers engage in this kind of theoretical work in order to rehabilitate religion as space for analysis and discussion within the field of education. Bourdieu was in all in favour of his concepts being used to interrogate academic disciplines. There is a very serious case to be made for the ascendancy of secular scientific epistemology within the discipline of education. This habitus assumes a utilitarian view of education diametrically at odds with Christian beliefs about personhood; somewhat ironically it is also a habitus that denies it is a habitus. This author is excited by the possibility that secular social theory might be exploited to re-appropriate and challenge the assumptions of secular educational sociology.

Notes

[1] Source Teachernet. Designated as follows: Christian (31), Church of England (19), Catholic (2), Church of England/Catholic (1).

[2] Approximately eight staff members were studying Total Truth as part of a reading group (Pearcey, 2005).

Bibliography

Angus, L. B (1988). *Continuity and change in Catholic schooling: An ethnography of a Christian Brothers college in Australian society*. London: The Falmer Press.

15

Cannell, F. (2006). *The anthropology of Christianity*. London: Duke University Press.

Ball, S. J. & Vincent, C. (1998). 'I heard it on the grapevine': 'Hot' knowledge and school choice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 19(3), 377-400.

Beck, J. (2007). Education and the middle classes: Against reductionism in educational theory and research. *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 55(1), 37-55.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Homo Academicus*. Paris: Ed de Minuit.

Berger, (1973). *The social reality of religion*. London: Penguin.

Bourdieu, P, & Passeron, J. –C. (1964). *Les héritiers, les étudiants et la culture,* Paris: Ed de Minuit.

Carson, D. (2008). *Christ and culture revisited*. Nottingham: Apollos.

Cooling, T. (1995). Curiosity: Vice or Virtue for the Christian Teacher? Promoting Faithfulness to Scripture in Teacher Formation. *Journal of Education and Christian Belief,* 9(2), 87-103.

Gillie, C & Bolton, P. (2010). *Academies Bill Research Paper*. London: HMSO.

Goheen, M. (2007). The Surrender and Recovery of the Unbearable Tension. *Journal of Education and Christian Belief,* 11(1), 7-21.

Grace, G. (2002). Catholic schools: Missions, markets and morality. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Grace, G. (2004). Making Connections for Future Directions: taking religion seriously in the sociology of education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* 14(1), 47-56.

Harding, S. (1991). Representing fundamentalism: The problem of the repugnant social other. *Social Research,* 58(2), 373-393.

Lawrence, N. (1998) Designing Educational Organisation in a Christian

Context. *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 2(2), 115-126.

McCleod, J. (2005) Feminists re-reading Bourdieu: old debates and new questions

about gender habitus and gender change. *Theory and Research in Education,*

3(1) 11-30.

Mills, K. (2003). The Culture of a Christian School. *Journal of Education and*

Christian Belief, 7(2), 129-142.

Moore, R. (2004). Cultural capital: Objective probability and the cultural arbitrary.

British Journal of Sociology of Education, 25(4), 445-456.

Paton, G. (2007, January 17). Pupils who flout uniform rules can be sent home. *The*

DailyTelegraph, p.1.

Pearcey, N. (2005) *Total truth: Liberating Christianity from Its cultural captivity.*

Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books.

Reay, D. (1998). *Class work.* London: University College London Press.

Rey, T. (2004). Marketing the goods of salvation: Bourdieu on religion. *Religion,*

34(4), 331-343.

Rey, R. (2005). The Origins, Early Development and Status of Bourdieu's Concept of

'Cultural Capital'. *The British Journal of Sociology,* 56(1), 13-30.

Schaeffer, F. A. (1972). *Genesis in space and time: The flow of biblical history.*

London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Smith, E. (2003). 'Ethos, Habitus and Situation for Learning: An ecology'. *British*

Journal of Sociology of Education, 24(4), 463-470.

Woods, P.A, Woods, G.J. & Gunter, H. M. (2007). Academy schools and

entrepreneurialism in education. *Journal of Education Policy,* 22(2) 263-85.