

'Exclusive' Brethren: an educational dilemma

1990¹

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Preface (2007)

This paper had its origin in discussions with a group of Exclusive pupils and their parents in the comprehensive school at which my wife, Jean Bigger, was Deputy Head. This was the time when the National Curriculum was being developed, and guidance documentation was appearing thick and fast. The Exclusive parents were suddenly presented with a problem. I had some vague inkling of what this problem entailed from my own upbringing (which had been very negative to Exclusives) but set up some interviews in two Exclusive communities, Oxford and Swindon. The word 'community' is a pertinent one: because of teachings outlined below, Exclusives need to live and work closely together: their rules do not allow association with others, even for eating, so young Exclusives tend to be employed by Exclusive firms. There are several such firms in Oxford, and one in my own village in Swindon. Marriages interlink these communities. The biblical requirement for women to cover their hair when praying is applied to all aspects of the day since the whole of life should be prayerful. So Exclusive girls and women wear a simple headscarf. Education up to 18 is encouraged and valued so long as the content is not corrupt (for example sexually explicit). The media, and especially television, is regarded as potentially corrupting so parents ask for their children to be excused from lessons involving video (although to listen but not watch is considered acceptable). For teachers in schools today, these issues still apply. The greatest difficulty is with ICT in the curriculum, because this is compulsory and there is no possibility of withdrawal from lessons through parental veto.

The term 'Exclusive Brethren' is not used or favoured by those described in this paper, but is retained for clarity to those outside. They would regard themselves as "the assembly", as indeed would Open Brethren. Nothing in this paper should be taken as an endorsement of Exclusive teachings but rather as an attempt to understand their point of view. I decided not to reproduce the complex style of argument based on Bible text that Exclusives would use themselves, as it is hard for those outside the tradition to understand its coherence. This would be a different study.

1990: Today's Dilemma for Exclusives

There has been some publicity recently on a point of principle which is presenting a dilemma to members of the 'Exclusive' Brethren regarding their children in school today - their unhappiness over their children becoming involved with Information Technology as part of the National Curriculum. There are in addition other parental wishes of which educational institutions should be aware - for example their desire to withdraw their children from all aspects of sex education, religious education and the "act of worship"; that their children eat separately from other children; that teaching does not advocate "worldly" practices such as the use of makeup or immoral actions; and that health education is decently and sensitively undertaken.

Hansard for 23 October 1989 notes that Mr. Shersby commented, under the (mistaken) heading "Plymouth Brethren"² that he had had representations from the *Plymouth* Brethren and sought the Minister's response. Mrs Rumbold replied: "I have received many representations from members of the Brethren that they should have the right to withdraw their children from elements of the secular curriculum in maintained schools to which they have religious objections. Article 2 of the first protocol to the European Convention on human rights does not give parents this right. My Right Hon.

Friend and I have decided, as a matter of policy, that we will not allow any group of parents the right to withdraw their children from the secular curriculum in maintained schools on grounds of religion or conscience. But they remain free to make alternative educational arrangements."

This ruling has implications for all religious groups. The confusion between "Plymouth" and "Exclusive" Brethren is not untypical; but it ought to be made clear that Plymouth Brethren - distant cousins maybe, but for well over a century a totally separate group - are in no way involved in the current representations, and do not associate themselves with the 'Exclusive' Brethren's point of view.

Who are the 'Exclusive' Brethren?

The 1960s and 1970s were characterised by persistent media character assassinations of "Exclusives". These media reports fed their condemnations more with myths than facts; their underlying prejudices were not even thinly veiled. If there had been similar attacks upon strict Muslims - many of whom have not dissimilar attitudes to the rightness of their doctrine and the decadence of Western society and education - this would scarcely have been tolerated.

The story begins in Dublin in 1827, when a group of Christians, disenchanted with contemporary churches, met for prayer and worship in their own homes. At first their meetings were timed so that members could worship at their regular churches, but gradually they ceased to do so. A public hall was used for Sunday worship after 1830. One visitor was A.N.Groves, a dentist from Plymouth, studying at Trinity College, Dublin's long established university. The Plymouth "Assembly" at Ebrington Street was, from 1831, to become large and influential, the focus of an extensive network of Brethren worship in Devon and the south-west. Another visitor to Dublin was John Nelson Darby, then curate in Calary, County Wicklow. A classics graduate and a lawyer, J.N. Darby rejected the church establishment and the principle of clergy, devoted great energies in translating the Bible (an accurate and sensitive translation still used by 'Exclusives'), and became a supreme influence on the Brethren until his death in 1882.

Francis Newman (brother of John Henry Newman) of Exeter College , Oxford spent 15 months in Ireland and was greatly influenced by J.N. Darby, who later visited him in Oxford. Francis Newman ultimately became a unitarian. His student Benjamin Newton came from Plymouth, and returned to the assembly there.

A partnership in Bristol is also interesting: penniless George Muller, famous for his orphanages funded entirely by gifts; and Henry Craik, a scholar of classical languages. They took over two chapels in Bristol, organising Bethesda Chapel on similar lines to a Brethren Assembly. As membership grew, many more assemblies were formed who viewed Bethesda as their parent assembly.

These small assemblies sought to escape from the formalism of contemporary worship; to remove barriers to worship created by church organisation; to show dissent from some of the 39 Articles, in particular Article 37 which advocated military service; and in general to search for a greater degree of individuality in spirituality. An important meeting was the "breaking of bread" commemorating the last supper. Many of the leaders were well educated, and shared with most theologians of the day a belief in the divine inspiration of scripture - a vital component of Brethren belief today. Among their central concerns was the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus, a Christian's responsibility to the church on earth, prophesy, the end-time, the second coming of Jesus, personal purity and separation from evil.

A split occurred in 1845 when J.N. Darby felt that B. Newton was seeking to establish a theological system of his own which was contrary to scriptural principles. There was a public interchange of tracts (Plymouth was an important production-centre for tracts) in which J.N. Darby pointed out a number of heresies in Newton's position. Newton publicly recanted on some points, apologised, and left the Brethren.

Members of Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, were criticised for receiving people from Plymouth into fellowship without a close examination of their doctrine. Bethesda responded in "the Letter of the Ten" that to investigate every person in detail would deflect them from their major concerns, to no real purpose. J.N. Darby responded with the "Bethesda Circular", in 1848: Brethren should withdraw from fellowship with Bethesda, and from any assembly in fellowship with them. The separation between 'open' and 'exclusive' Brethren took place at this point. The name 'Exclusive' is a nickname not used by the Brethren themselves, who refer to themselves simply as "brethren" or "believers". The local group is called "the assembly". It is retained in this article simply for the sake of clarity.

The Bethesda assemblies continued to flourish. Their members felt free to worship with whoever they felt comfortable, without investigating their beliefs in minute detail. "Open" Brethren assemblies like these are still independent, and in the wake of adverse publicity against 'Exclusives', even sometimes drop the term 'Brethren', producing phrases like "assembly of Christians".

Later development of 'Exclusive' Brethren assemblies

J.N. Darby died in 1882 after a long life of devoted spiritual leadership. By then, the movement had 11 monthly magazines, some with a 50,000 circulation. There were 750 meetings in the UK, 101 in Canada, 91 in the USA, 39 in Holland, 189 in Germany, 146 in France and 72 in Switzerland. There were rifts, as some individuals and groups preferred their own way to church discipline. Some retained their own style of exclusivity such as William Kelly's assemblies and the 'Needed Truth' group, named after their magazine in 1892 - neither linked with today's 'Exclusives'. 'Exclusive' Brethren have always seen the problem as being how to maintain purity in an evil world, when even one's Brethren colleagues may be prepared to compromise. Their response was, and is still, to withdraw from evil, and from fellowship with anyone willingly associated with evil.

J.N. Darby was the first of the "great men" in a time 'Exclusives' refer to as the "revival of the truth". His publications and letters are carefully studied, and made available by Brethren publishing houses such as the *Bible and Gospel Trust*. Other "great men" are deeply respected - such as F.E. Raven, James Taylor, and James Taylor Jnr, and many others - and unjustified criticism of these is upsetting. James Taylor Jnr. in particular was subjected to savage adverse media publicity as the press continually homed in on the movement. Contrary to press accusations, the Brethren have no formal or hierarchical leaders, but regard service to the church as a responsibility to be undertaken in all humility.

Doctrinal purity

The view of the divine inspiration of the Bible is less common now in academic and even in some church contexts than in the 1840s, but 'Exclusive' Brethren retain this view. Doctrinal arguments can be solved only by appeal to "Scripture". Theological positions must be scrutinised constantly - decisions on whether people are to 'remain in fellowship' or new members 'received into fellowship' are based on the 'soundness' of their belief and teaching. This is never used as an excuse for attempts to justify one's own behaviour by reference to apt Bible texts, but in the light of the whole Bible - applying "scripture principles" to circumstances and situations.

Purity of doctrine requires standards and discipline. Communities are vigilant about who is to be admitted, and about the views which are expressed in meetings. There is a thriving programme of open-air preaching universally, although resulting in few new converts; few members are in practice excluded on doctrinal grounds and few children seem in practice to break away.³ The Brethren spoke of the current pressures on children in schools deepening children's resolve rather than weakening it. Children are brought into fellowship from infancy onwards so that worship is always seen as a family affair. Baptism takes place in the household (Acts 16.33) so that an infant would be baptised (by immersion) as quickly as possible (usually at 8 days old) and incorporated in family worship. Strong local roots is stressed as important, and strong local communities have developed.

They see themselves as 'in the world' (dealing necessarily with customers, clients and fellow pupils) 'but not of it', not entering into 'worldly' ambitions or values, and not 'associating' (or "being unequally yoked") with 'non-believers' since this implies fellowship with them. They would not therefore join societies, clubs or associations (even the AA or RAC).

Sharing a meal is a potent biblical symbol of *association* or *fellowship*, so meals should not be shared with non-believers. Therefore 'Exclusives' do not eat with 'non-believers' even if these are members of their own family. Their children in school would accordingly wish to eat apart from other pupils. Most would if possible go home for lunch: the family is cherished as a strong and loving unit, and meals a good time to foster this. The meal would be accompanied by Bible readings, a verse of a hymn, a prayer and discussions about everyday experiences and problems.

Exclusion from religious education

Being taught about religion, and Christianity in particular, by a 'non-believer' (non-Exclusive) would not result in sound doctrine. The difference between sound and unsound doctrine is often subtle, so any exploration of other people's views needs to come at a time when young people's own views are fully understood. The 'act of worship' is regarded in the same way: of course, pupils can attend assembly if they have been assured that no explicit religious teaching will be given.

Computers

The last century has seen great strides in human achievement. Humans are capable now of great good, but also evil on a monstrous scale. The key to much of this 'progress' is the computer. 'Progress' is accompanied by pride, as people seek to create a new world, and to sweep aside the old, as it were to emulate God himself. Further, the computer⁴ represents an assault on individual freedoms as unchecked data accumulates. Computers have no values, but make decisions mechanistically, having no regard for issues which should be central - moral dilemmas, intrinsic worth and human concerns. In short, the computer represents the greatest danger, physically as well as spiritually, to humankind. It makes global annihilation possible, and can be a powerful tool of social control. Yet humanity puts great store by them, tying up their hopes and aspirations in a form to technology to which moral and spiritual values are irrelevant. The computer, is thus seen as an immensely anti-Christian force, an agent so to speak, of the Devil himself. Therefore, 'Exclusive' Brethren do not use computers in any form, and do not wish their children to learn how to use them in school.

The Exclusives' strong objections are thus theologically central. In our present 'dispensation' (that is the period of time immediately before the second coming of Jesus) possible association with anti-Christian forces takes on for Exclusives renewed meaning, as the struggles described in the book of Revelation between the forces of Christ and anti-Christ unfold in real history. To associate today with the forces of anti-Christ presents a greater than usual threat to spiritual purity.

The Government's insistence on computer awareness being a compulsory part of the National Curriculum seems to have no easy resolution, since 'Exclusives' neither wish to leave state schooling, nor are as a body able to set up their own schools. It is not ideal, but may be possible as an interim measure, to learn *about* computers using suitable *written* material, without having "hands-on" experience. Pupils may be demonstrably *able to* meet the relevant attainment targets, even though they are *unwilling* to put these into practice. Such material would need to be acceptable both to 'Exclusives' and educationalists.

Purity, decency, and moral action

The world is obsessed with self-centred ethics, seeking money and power, and demanding selfish gratification. Indecent images from books, television and films fix themselves unhelpfully in the mind. 'Exclusives' do not have television or radio, since these are viewed as avenues for indecency and immorality - or simply a complete waste of time. Reading material (such as magazines) would also be restricted on similar principles. If it is not helpful to fill the mind with indecent images, why do it? This view has implications for school provision. 'Exclusive' children will not be comfortable with television or videos, and would prefer alternatives to be offered to them. Lessons based entirely on video will therefore cause problems, and the child may ask to be given an alternative based on a text-book. In the selection material for English literature, some books, particularly at A level, are regarded as offensive in that indecency is portrayed, or characters act immorally without criticism.

'Exclusives' will always withdraw their children from any form of sex education: this is seen as a family responsibility, so that guidance can be given in an appropriate moral and spiritual setting. They see no need for detailed AIDS education, since their lifestyle puts them in the 'no risk' category. In short, issues of conscience involve all of life, and 'Exclusives' wish to exercise the right of conscience in selecting suitable materials, or in withdrawing their children from the activity if there are no other options. In matters of evil, they argue, there are some things that it is better not to have experienced. Children do not need to learn how to cope with evil, just to recognize it so they can withdraw from it.

'Exclusive' young people tend not to go on to Higher Education, as education at this level is regarded as unhelpful both morally and spiritually.

Politics

Exclusives do not vote or take any part in politics, praying rather that the government in power be granted wisdom. In most circumstances, government will be respected: but there may be times when unacceptable and immoral demands are made and have to be resisted, (as when, in *Daniel* in the Bible, three young men refused to bow down before a golden image in spite of a royal command). Their wish is for governments to make allowances for conscience - as has happened recently (1989) through a directive allowing for the Brethren to be excused from jury service.

Recommendations

Criticising Exclusives for being "difficult" and their system for being "narrow" will not help the present situation. Since membership is small, their problem may quickly drop out of the headlines, but it will continue to perplex both parents and teachers. We have to begin by recognising that the 'Exclusive' position is sincerely held, for reasons which have their own internal logic and rationale.

The following may prove helpful for schools who have children from 'Exclusive' families:

- 1) Discuss arrangements with parents: they want their children to learn and will help a school find solutions.

- 2) Try to ensure that withdrawal from assembly does not exclude children from the school community. Indicate when assemblies will not be explicitly religious, to give them the opportunity to decide whether to attend.
- 3) Ease their withdrawal from religious education. Parents are not subject to persuasion, since a school can offer no reasonable assurances to allay their fears.
- 4) If a school uses cross-curricular "integrated" teaching strategies, ensure there are sufficient choices for 'Exclusive' children to have alternatives to the input on religious education.
- 5) In December, provide useful alternatives when work about Christmas is planned.⁵
- 6) Allow some freedom of choice in the stories or novels that pupils are asked to read, and seek parental wishes if necessary.⁶
- 7) Allow for separate lunch arrangements when necessary - although in practice many of the children will go home for lunch.
- 8) Structure lessons using television, video or radio in such a way that there are alternatives to the video input.

Postscript

The Exclusive Brethren did not get an exemption from the ICT National Curriculum requirements despite substantial lobbying. There has been a degree of reflection on the usefulness of the computer as a tool, as opposed to being on-line and open to internet material. Indeed most cars and domestic machinery contains microchips of various forms. They have however not yet solved this theologically.

This article proved to be an interesting exercise in dialogue and 'openness': for the author, now an agnostic brought up in the Open Brethren, it was interesting to discover the bias in my recollections of what I had been told about the 'Exclusives' as a child (reproduced savagely in some books on the history of the Brethren written by members of the Open Brethren). It is easy to become irritated, superior and defensive when faced with views which we, through rationalistic training, believe you have 'grown out of' and have moved far away from - which could make it difficult for researchers from the Christian tradition to keep an open mind and give groups like 'Exclusives' a fair hearing - to 'bracket out' our own biases, as phenomenology insists we must. In our conversations, their message had a clear and internal logic, once their theological premises were understood; their deep sincerity was obvious, as was their enjoyment of life, and their security within it. We were talking about things *which mattered* - and it was interesting how often what mattered to them also mattered to me (for example issues of media and internet indecency, violence and exploitation). Curiously, their sorrow for my present 'confusion' ⁷ (caused inevitably by higher education) seemed very poignant. It has also been interesting to see how over the years since, the national and international administration has adjusted to the usefulness of databases and word processing whilst maintaining the views expressed above, which has required a degree of theological light-footedness.

¹ Minor editing took place in 2007, and the addition of endnotes, but this remains the 1990 version rather than a new edition.

² In popular parlance, this heading should have said 'Exclusive Brethren' (see below).

³ Open air preaching brings the Gospel to everyone, so that they cannot claim not to have heard. If they do not follow the Gospel teaching, they suffer eternal consequences. Exclusion for doctrinal impurity is called *shunning* – a shunned person would not be spoken to or eaten with, even if living in the same house.

⁴ The following tries to represent the 'Exclusive' Brethren view on computers in non-theological language, and should not be viewed as not the opinions of the author. This section of the discussion is based on interviews.

⁵ Since 'Exclusives' would not see Christmas celebrations as meaningful, helpful or acceptable.

⁶ The main issue here is on decency, including bad language and representations of sexual acts.

⁷ That is, as lapsed Brethren. The 'confusion' refers to the *absence of certainty*.