

# Full immersion: a valid approach to worship in Christian schools?

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Advocates of the immersion approach to language learning point to its effectiveness with young learners in particular. Immersion uses the target language—say, French—as a teaching instrument for all subjects on the school curriculum, as well as for extracurricular activities. A related approach called partial immersion commits a portion—usually about half—of school time to employing the target language.

While the immersion approach is not as effective as some other methods in developing grammatical accuracy, its proponents suggest that being thrown in at the deep end forces the learners to develop their skills to the point where it is almost impossible *not* to become fluent in the language. Not only that, learners become adept in using the language in more authentic ways.

Could it be, then, that immersion—understood loosely—is the best approach to worship in Christian schools? In other words, is it legitimate, even advisable, to 'subject' the school community to the experience of Christian worship, whether or not all are Christians? Perhaps such an immersion experience will allow them to 'pick up' at least some cognitive understanding of Christian worship, maybe an affective appreciation of it, and in some students or staff Christian faith may be created and/or nurtured.

There is a need here to clarify what we mean by 'worship'. A broad range of terms for worship is used in the New Testament. Brunner boils down the experience to this: 'worship means to be assembled in the name of Jesus' (18). Defining worship more precisely and systematically, the Lutheran writer Timothy Maschke (19–20) describes it as the kind of faith-based activity which occurs the world over on Sundays and which includes the dimensions of

- Encounter: Worship is a profound encounter with God and his manifold gifts to his people (19).
- Expression: Worship is also an expression of our faith or a response to what God has done for us in Christ (22).

- Education: As education, worship teaches the faith and nurtures the faithful because it is Word-oriented (24).
- Evangelism: Whatever we do in worship expresses our faith so that others may see (25).

Worship in Christian schools is associated with a wide range of events, including whole school chapels, small group devotions, end-of-year services, staff devotions and Eucharistic celebrations, to name just a few. This article focuses on large group worship events which students and staff are required to attend. Unless otherwise indicated, the Christian *schools* under consideration here have diverse student and staff populations. They include Christians of various persuasions, theists, agnostics, atheists and adherents of non-Christian traditions.

The idea of worship in schools as immersion is not a new one. Some history of church schooling will help to spell this out. At the time of the Lutheran Reformation in Europe there were many schools for boys—some also for girls—that were run by the church or by the church on behalf of the state. In many cases these were music schools, since many of them had been set up to provide music for worship in associated churches. These grammar schools had a focus on training a choir for the performance of the divine service in large city churches, while others were more strictly grammar schools that trained young people for work in the church and in public life. Many were also boarding schools.

At these schools all students were baptised members of the church, as were virtually all the citizens of the countries of Europe at that time. As far as worship was concerned, it was the tradition at these schools to hold matins and vespers daily. Later, princes established their own schools to train people for service to church and society. For example, the hymn writer Paul Gerhardt attended a Lutheran school in order to get a classical theological education. Such schools took students beyond what we would call today year twelve. These schools had their origin in the Middle Ages. They were often established in monasteries that had closed but were kept for church use as hospitals, schools and the like.

In keeping with the monastic history of the buildings, education in these schools was somewhat monastic in style. Some retained the seven hours of the daily office. These were matins and lauds, counted as one, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline. The worship day began at 1.00 am in summer and concluded at 8.00 pm. Most limited worship to matins and vespers, to allow time for the education program. The emphasis in this approach was the immersing of students in Christian worship. It operated on the assumption that all students were baptised Christians and with the conviction—conscious or otherwise—that the way to learn the faith was just to do it through worship.

Of course, our purpose here is not to evaluate past practices but to consider their validity for Christian schools at the beginning of the twenty first century. So, considering the changed nature of so many Christian school communities from totally Christian to highly

pluralistic, can immersion be seriously considered as theologically, philosophically and educationally valid practice for the kinds of Christian schools described above?

In what follows, a case will be made for the value of immersing the members of a school community in the experience of Christian worship, even if it is alien to many. Supporting the case made here is the common experience of people spending time in cultures other than their own—including students on a visit to another country—who often speak with joy and gratitude of the fact that they were welcomed into a particular family or school. An element of this experience has been that these visitors were permitted to observe and even take part in aspects of that community's rituals and ceremonies. Perhaps there is a parallel here to the situation of non-Christians attending Christian worship.

There is also a strong attraction within Generation X and Y for ritual and its associated mystery. Such an attraction is nothing new, just more pronounced in these generations than previous generations. Learning by experience and doing through ritual is significant in all generations, but it is especially so for young children. This leads to the conclusion that there is special value in providing worship experiences for this age group which involve them in the action in as many ways as possible. As a consequence the young students will be helped to grasp Christian realities more fully, and the opportunity for development of the child's faith will be enhanced. Apparently, not only the very young benefit from such an approach. He was officially Anglican but former British Prime Minister Tony Blair regularly attended Catholic mass with his wife Cherie. Following his recent conversion to Catholicism, his former press secretary remarked in an interview on ABC Radio National that 'if you pray the mystery of the mass, you believe it too'. In response to the question, 'How do you learn mystery?' Paprocki and Williamson say you don't.

You enter into, encounter, and experience it... How, then, do you teach or communicate mystery to another? Again, you don't. The most you can do is proclaim your own experience, which is not easy to do in words alone, invite others to enter into it, and then accompany them on the pathway that leads to and then through their own experience of mystery. Just ask any catechist who has worked with adults preparing for baptism. (1)

As an illustration of this the authors (2) describe the experience of American Civil War veteran John Dunbar as portrayed in the film *Dances with wolves*. He is assigned to an abandoned fort where he is serving alone. Recuperating after a severe injury and after trying to end his life, Dunbar is invited by the local Sioux tribe to participate in the bison hunt and the sacred rituals which follow, finds himself drawn into the 'mystery' and becomes a changed man.

I have observed this phenomenon in the context of sacramental celebrations within school worship. In my previous school I regularly observed the attraction of the Eucharistic mystery for many student boarders who were neither Lutherans nor consciously committed Christians. These young people had to attend Sunday Eucharistic services, yet they were drawn to go forward and receive Holy Communion. I made it a point whenever I knew about this to speak pastorally with the students involved. Occasionally I have come across a student who did it 'for a dare' or out of idle curiosity, but in the vast majority of cases they expressed a genuine yearning for the mysterious 'something' in the sacrament. Most of these students have also been able to articulate, however simply, what this 'something' was for them. Especially remarkable is that all this occurred in spite of the fact that the students were 'forced' to attend worship.

The subject of 'mystery' within the context of worship immersion takes us unavoidably into the area of ritual. Ritual is gaining more attention as postmodernism takes effect and people become more open to realities beyond the empirical. Ritual is central to liturgical Christian worship. Apart from the sign of the cross there is the passing of the peace, the holding up of the host in the sacrament, the placing of the minister's hand on the head of the person being baptised or confirmed, to name just a few ritual actions. Even Christian denominational traditions which eschew liturgy and ritual find it impossible to avoid it altogether.

In what ways can and does ritual contribute to the effectiveness of the immersion experience in school worship? A personal experience may help to provide an answer. In late 2007 I was doing some supply teaching in the school where I had been pastor for nine years until the end of 2006. On a brief visit to a Year 2 class, a boy asked me if I could do the 'within me' with them again. At first I had no idea what he was talking about, but with repeated attempts at 'translation' the penny dropped. He was asking me to pray the version of St Patrick's Prayer, with actions, I had used regularly in Junior School chapels during my time at the school. So, I dusted off the cobwebs of my brain, and we did it there in the Year 2 classroom.

Christ be with me (hands to chest)

Christ before me (palms extended in front of chest)

Christ behind me... (You get the idea)

There is considerable anecdotal evidence that by being immersed in worship, significant numbers of students and staff learn, cognitively, affectively, spiritually. This evidence is not sufficient, of course. More serious and thorough consideration needs to be given to the philosophical issues involved in Christian school worship. Marius J Felderhof from the University of Birmingham has responded convincingly to Professor John Hull's position on school worship, published in 1975. Hull's book, *School worship: an obituary*, was written against the backdrop of the reality in the United Kingdom.

Since the 1944 Education Act a daily act of worship has been a legal requirement in all state schools. In that legislation it had to be the whole school assembling at the start of the day. Despite the legal right of withdrawal from assembly, this statute was controversial from the beginning, but the rapid changes in British society since the Second World War—especially secularisation and immigration—soon brought massive pressures to bear on schools as they tried to keep the law. The typical format of the school assembly changed under the influence of these pressures from a watered-down church service in the 1950s to the whole variety of pick-and-mix cocktails from the 1960s onwards. The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) tried to provide a more realistic legal framework for collective worship. It sought to satisfy the desire to maintain the Christian heritage of Britain by retaining the legal requirement for daily collective worship and specified that it should be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'. (Cheetham: 3,4)

In certain key respects, questions about school worship in government-run schools in Britain are remarkably similar to those faced by most Christian schools in Australia. Both systems contain very culturally and religiously diverse populations of students and staff, so both school systems must question the appropriateness of requiring the attendance of everyone at acts of worship which are essentially Christian in nature. This is the core question which Hull addresses in his work.

He contends that 'because of the pluralistic nature of the school communities and of the community at large to which the school is responsible, and because of the nature of the education process compared with the nature of worship, and so on, worship in the county school is an anomaly' (104).

Central to Hull's position is his distinction between 'general' education and 'specific' education. He describes 'general' education as 'that entire relationship between the generations in which the total culture of a society is passed on and renewed. In this broadest sense, everything we are that has not been genetically inherited, our language, our outlook, all that has been learned, is the product of education' (4).

On the other hand, for Hull, 'specific' education has six defining features.

1. It seeks to pass on knowledge of the principles of a subject (53).
2. It is interested in the person rather than the content (54).
3. It welcomes controversy (55).
4. It seeks to engage the active support of the pupil, to elicit his (sic) willing co-operation and to enhance his autonomy, and is deliberately critical of its own content (56).
5. It must be ethical in the way it treats people, which prevents it from violating the individual's own personal growth (56).
6. And finally, its authority is intrinsic to the person. Extrinsic controls over learning are only compatible with specific education if their intention is to make themselves unnecessary as soon as possible (58).

Hull's position, which is dependent on this distinction between general and specific education, is succinctly summarised by Felderhof as follows:

1. All activities in school are—or ought to be—either 'specifically' educational or 'broadly' educational.
2. Worship intrinsically subverts education in its specific sense.
3. Therefore worship cannot be a part of schooling devoted to specific education.
4. In general, there are many activities that are broadly educational, of which worship may be one.
5. In British schools only those broadly educational activities are appropriate to it which are subordinate to, and ultimately serve the objectives of, education in its more specific sense.
6. However, worship cannot be one of the broadly educational activities that are subordinate to, and ultimately serve the objectives of, 'specific' education because it intrinsically subverts specific education.
7. Therefore, it is always inappropriate to worship in school. (223)

Of particular interest here is the fact that Hull dedicates a chapter to the same issue as it applies to *church* schools. He suggests that, where a school population is made up entirely of children of, say, Catholics, worship and education may be compatible, though not necessarily advisable. Even in this Christian school context, though, worship must not be conducted in such a way that it deprives the hearer of reason (105). In stressing further that the goals of specific education not be violated, Hull goes on to say:

Pupils and their parents in church schools have a right to expect that the authorities in the school will provide a chapel and a chaplain and other aids for coming to know and live and worship as Christians. But because of the mixed nature of most church schools and because of the educational role of all of them, nurture must be offered, not enforced. It must be available but it must not be compulsory. (110)

In response to Hull, Felderhof says that it is indeed philosophically valid to include worship in schools. If the school is serious about teaching religion then it must include worship because it is not possible to understand a religion without experience of that religion's worship. Worship is of the very essence of a religion 'as its motivation, substance and goal' (219).

Felderhof says that Hull's second premise (above) is fundamentally flawed. He points out that there is an evident compatibility between many quite different human activities, such as walking and talking. In schools as well, such disparate actions as disciplining and entertaining, caring and competing, can happily coexist. Felderhof (222) asserts that Hull needs to show that worship *subverts* the goals of education, in the same way that 'drowning' and 'breathing' are incompatible.

He goes on to suggest that, only if education is committed wholly and solely to specific education, can worship be regarded as subverting it. But Hull himself includes 'training' and 'instruction' within his description of broadly educational activities and clearly the world of schooling embraces these. Felderhof points out Hull's admission that, since 'worship is amenable to training and instruction and one might train and instruct through worship, then in this sphere at least there seems to be no reason for excluding worship from the schooling process ... under the broader heading of general education' (223).

Felderhof then contends that 'education that aspires to share with the young the complexity of human life will also wish to give access to the religious life. On the condition that, *prima facie*, religious life appears to have some intrinsic merit, there would be some ground for sharing its practice in school' (226). Writers like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Phillip Adams will dispute this, but assumptions are constantly being made in schooling about the merits, for example, of business studies. Why should religion be singled out for special attention? Felderhof continues with the claim that, as a consequence of the previous point, worship in school is educationally important because it is central to religious life, and for the development of the understanding of something—in this case, religion—one must master its practice (227).

In the second part of his critique, Felderhof addresses Hull's claim that 'literal worship'—as distinct from activities like personal reflection not directed at a deity—and a questioning attitude are incompatible. But which Christian could honestly claim, as Hull does, that for us 'worship always takes place on the far side of that kind of critical and self-conscious reflection' (36), as if certainty of doctrine is the *sine qua non* of worship. Felderhof (22) points out two flaws in Hull's reasoning at this point.

1. If the unconditional willingness to question everything rules out every commitment as such, how can education be self-critical?
2. Does the devotion found in worship prevent self-critical questioning? If so, what is one to do with the questioning of Job, or with the Psalmist who, in the context of worship, exclaims, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Psalm 22.1), or what is one to do with St Anselm's *Proslogion*, where the sense of belief in God is tested within the context of meditational prayer?

Whatever the nature of the faith of those present, 'literal' worship can still take place. That is, people can still be 'assembled in the name of Jesus' (Brunner), and what takes place can still involve encounter, expression, education and evangelism (Maschke).

Felderhof concludes his critique of Hull's position using Socrates, 'sometimes taken as the paradigm of all educators', as a test case. Space does not permit a detailed summary of Felderhof on this. In summary, though, he shows (22–24) how both education and religion were bound up in the trial that led to Socrates' execution. The charge against him was that his questioning approach to education had brought about the corruption of the young. Moreover, he was also accused of impiety for his rejection of the established religion. Yet his defence address at his trial concluded with an appeal

to the judgement of God. Felderhof comments (23) that Socrates' 'educational practice of radical questioning, his integrity, his unconditional commitment and his piety all seemed to be interrelated and interdependent'.

Hull claims that 'there is a tension between worship and education. This tension may be summarised by saying that worship is committed to its content and is passionate and adoring, while education is detached from its content and is inquiring and reflective' (62). But I have substantial anecdotal evidence from my own experience and the experience of others, both young and old, of education and worship not only co-existing but also nurturing the other. Essential for this happy coexistence is thoughtful explanation of the reasons that worship is included in the life of the school. Also vital is the use of sensitive, non-presumptuous language in worship which does not compromise the intelligence or the conscience of those present, especially as children turn into adolescents and adults.

Felderhof acknowledges that 'whether (worship in schools) is practicable, socially desirable and politically reasonable in an increasingly secular and religiously plural society is quite another matter' (219). Nevertheless, he makes a strong case for the legitimacy of worship in schools and, I would add, the legitimacy of immersing the whole church school community in worship because it is cognitively, affectively and spiritually helpful within the overall educational process.

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