

BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE DIALOGUE ON VALUES
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ON THE LINK BETWEEN TRUTH AND VALUES

"My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." [Jeremiah 2:13]

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. . . . This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes to the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." [John 3:14 - 15, 17 - 21.]

What is true and what is valuable enough to live by are inextricably linked. For instance, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" expresses the *moral* principle that one should live and stand by the light of truth.

Indeed, we may easily observe that, as a practical matter, calculated deceit and "a bodyguard of lies" intended to fend off the truth are characteristic marks of wrongdoing. For: "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."

Clearly, then, the commitment to seek and live by the truth is critical to any system of values worth having. But, this leaves Pilate's question as yet unanswered: "What is truth?" And, we also must face the charge that is so often levelled today: "How dare you try to impose *your* intolerant truth, *your* intolerant values and *your* intolerant god on others!"

A. Truth, Error and Tolerance: This must be dealt with first, as the fear that those who stand up for truth are liable to impose "their truth" on others may so prejudice the issue that real dialogue becomes impossible.

First, let us consider the belief that "there is nothing more to truth than 'it seems true to me or to you that . . .'" Now, let us observe carefully: such a belief that there is no objective truth is itself a claim to objective truth! Not only is this a self-contradiction in logic — thus, the mark of a confused mind — but also it easily opens the door to blindly imposing *your* 'truth' — i.e. relativism — on others!!

Indeed, any attempt to deny the existence of objective truth ends in self-contradiction. Thus, it seems wiser to:

- (1) Acknowledge the possibility that truth exists, since denying this possibility always ends in self-contradiction and confusion.
- (2) Accept that "to err is human," so one should respect the fact of diversity and learn to disagree without becoming disagreeable.
- (3) Commit oneself to an ongoing, open-minded, critical assessment of truth claims, not least one's own.

- (4) Decide to live by the truth, and to work together with men of good-will towards the good of the community.

B. Truth-Claims and Value Systems: At a philosophical level, what we believe to be ultimately true leads directly to what we value enough to live by: our principles.

For instance, if one believes that we are the result of random chance in a purposeless universe, then human life can have no ultimate value or meaning, so one is that much more likely to simply live aimlessly or selfishly, and to manipulate or abuse others. If, alternatively, one believes that one's suffering is the inexorable result of misdeeds in a past life, one is likely to become indifferent in the face of suffering, poverty or oppression in the community. Thus, beliefs have consequences in the real world.

Therefore, as Rev. Ram Balgobin has wisely pointed out, we should critically assess "underlying principles and . . . premises" as we evaluate issues and policies that deal with values and values education in our community.

In particular, we will need to understand that the assumption or belief that values are essentially subjective has serious, perhaps unforeseen consequences. For instance, when the Nazis were put on trial at Nuremberg for their war crimes, they challenged the validity of the trial: what right have you got to impose *your* standards of right and wrong on us? Similarly, what was the *basis* for asserting that Apartheid was wrong and should be eliminated? Along the same line, what about slavery, racism and sexism?

That is, when we rule out objective standards for truth and right, the resulting radical relativism may well force us to resort to power or manipulation to settle questions of morality; exactly what "tolerance" is supposed to avert.

C. The Issue of Truth: Several key points need to be faced as we seek to discover and live by the truth in the case of the current controversy:

- ✓ The public controversy was ignited by a "*suggestion* that the book be used as *the basis for morning assembly* come the start of the new school term in September." [CANA Report, *S. Gleaner*, Sept. 19 1999, 10F.] Since morning assembly in a school is led by authority figures, and is highly charged with symbolism about the basic values and beliefs of the community — in the explicit context of shaping the direction of the next generation — so significant a move should not be undertaken "quietly," i.e. without public deliberation. The ongoing debate is therefore appropriate, and passion about deeply felt convictions is to be expected and respected rather than derided.
- ✓ The CANA report highlights that "the book comes up against *an extremely conservative religious philosophy* existing in the former British colony." It is therefore appropriate to point out that conservatism and religion are not inevitable enemies of truth or wisdom. For, if one has reason to believe that a present belief system or policy is fundamentally sound, one would be foolish indeed to simply surrender it because someone else wishes to assert a rival truth-claim: teachers CORRECT the errors of their pupils! Of course, if it can be *shown* that the present beliefs and policies are unsound, then that is another matter.

- ✓ But this is precisely the underlying point at stake. As the Apostle Paul pointed out long ago to the Athenian intellectuals: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth . . . he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men . . . and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live . . . so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' . . . Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like . . . an image made by man's design and skill. [Whether such an image is sculptural, literary or electronic makes little difference.] In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, [i.e. Jesus Christ]. *He has given proof of this to all men* by raising him from the dead." Elsewhere, Paul adds that there were "more than five hundred" eyewitnesses to the risen Christ, most of whom were yet living when the record was made. [Acts 17:24-30 & 1 Cor 15:6.]
- ✓ In short, before setting out to put an embalmed guru in the place of a risen Lord and Saviour, we should first examine and deliberate the strength of the respective contradictory truth-claims. [Cf. opening page, Sai Baba web site.] To do otherwise, plainly, is to impose one's beliefs and values on others. To compound this by characterising the resulting protests as intolerance, frankly, would be hypocritical.
- ✓ Lest I seem to exaggerate, I will cite Sai Baba's *Assurance to Devotees*: "1.No harm shall befall him who sets his foot on the soil of Shirdi. 2.He who cometh to My Samadhi, his sorrow and suffering shall cease. 3.Though I be no more in flesh and blood, I shall ever protect My devotees. 4.Trust in Me and your prayer shall be answered. 5.Know that My Spirit is immortal. Know this for yourself. 6.Show unto Me he who sought refuge and been turned away. 7.In whatever faith men worship Me, even so do I render to them. 8.Not in vain is My Promise that I shall ever lighten your burden. 9.Knock, and the door shall open. Ask and ye shall be granted. 10.To him who surrenders unto Me totally I shall be ever indebted. 11.Blessed is he who has become one with Me." [Originally written in Marathi by Shri Mohaniraj Pandit and later translated into English. Source: Publications of the Shirdi Sai Baba Sansthan. Cf. Sai Baba Web site.]
- ✓ Thus, the reported opinion that the issue is simply the effective promotion of good values and diversity in Barbados' Schools appears to miss the mark: "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Oddly, truth is one of the five values highlighted in the book! In short, one cannot duck the issue of truth when one tackles the ongoing crisis of values; for, as Paul argues in Romans 1:18 -32, it is the turning of one's back on knowable truth about God that opens the floodgates to moral disintegration. One may reject this Christian truth claim about morality and values, but let that be as a result of examining the evidence, rather than "suppress[ing] the truth" [Rom. 1:18], prejudice and manipulation.
- ✓ Of course, to some, Christian truth-claims are not to be taken seriously, and religious frameworks in general are to be assessed on pragmatic — "does it 'work' for me" — grounds, as it is believed that such truth claims are only subjective; they cannot stand up to informed Scientific and Rational scrutiny. This is itself a truth-claim that requires examination and deliberation! And, serious examination will rapidly reveal that the "Scientific and Rational" scepticism against the central validating truth-claim

of the gospel, Jesus' resurrection, principally rests on a circular argument. [Cf. J. P. Moreland's *Scaling the Secular City* (Baker) and Ronald Nash's *Faith and Reason* (Zondervan) for more details.]

- ✓ Specifically, the possibility of miracles is doubted because natural law is "exceptionless." But, that is precisely the issue at stake: we cannot simply induce a universal claim from some finite number of instances, then dismiss a counterexample backed up by five hundred eyewitnesses and continued miraculous power down to today, because it does not fit our preconceptions. That, sirs, is prejudice. [Cf. many excellent works on the subject.] While it is in order to critically assess the claim that miracles occur — and, to stand out as distinct "signs," miracles *require* a general orderliness to nature [cf. C. S. Lewis' *Miracles*] — to dismiss their possibility by begging the question is not.

D Ideas Toward Sound Values/Moral Education: As we have discussed above, values and basic beliefs are inextricably linked. At the same time, there is need to respect the obvious diversity of world-views in our community, while promoting sound values and moral habits, if we are to avoid anarchy. This poses a challenge to several key institutions: the home, the church, the school, the printed, electronic and information technology media, and the state. Thus, we can see the importance of our present deliberations.

Perhaps, the following may help point to a way forward:

- ✓ Radical relativism about truth and values clearly leads to self-contradiction and confusion, promoting that anarchy in which "every man does what is right in his own eyes." [Cf. Judges 21:25.] Let us rather accept that the concepts: *truth* and *right* have objective validity, but "to err is human." In this context, we can then seek to build a reasonable consensus about basic values and vital truths, while fostering the habits of respect for diversity, balanced by critical awareness and openness to correction/reform/growth. In the words of Jesus, from the Sermon on the Mount: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness." [Matt. 6:22 - 23; cf. Proverbs 14:12.]
- ✓ An excellent place to start moral instruction would be the Golden Rule, the high-point of that Sermon: "in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." [Matt. 7:12.] Given Barbados' history and manifest Judeo-Christian heritage, Moses' Ten Commandments also have a central place. [Cf. Exodus 20:1 - 17.] It would be fair to say that their underlying values are a consensus of well-thinking people; i.e. respect . . .
 - for the Transcendent;
 - for times of rest, reflection and thanksgiving;
 - for parents;
 - for human life;
 - for the covenant of marriage;
 - for property;
 - for truth; and,
 - last but not least, a generous respect for the achievements of others.

It is on values such as these that sound lives and great nations are built. [Cf. C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*.]

- ✓ Basic instruction in or exposure to such values and virtues does not necessarily entail a sectarian spirit; or the specific establishment of any Sect, Church or Religion; or the arbitrary imposition of debatable — or even dubious — religious or philosophical Doctrines. (And, we must reiterate: an implicit policy to teach values in a relativist frame — far from being respectful of diversity — would actually be just such an arbitrary imposition.)
- ✓ A glance at William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, or many similar works, will quickly show that great stories and great literature, especially when reflected in the example set by those who teach — in the home, church, school, public and media — are quite effective in inculcating virtue without undue sectarian bias.
- ✓ Similarly, respect for diversity, liberty and reform are best learned by studying the lives of great reformers. If such study is to be balanced and truthful, it should not shun to point out the clay feet of even the greatest of men and women. (Without the story of Bathsheba, David's kingship would be far less instructive!)
- ✓ As students advance to the stage where they are ready for abstract thought, they should be exposed to sound principles of reasoning — including the limitations as well as the strengths of deductive and inductive argument patterns, and those of mathematical, scientific and statistical methods. Exposure to basic fallacies and a critical assessment of appeals to emotions, to authority, and to facts and logical inference — providing an insight into the provisional nature of human knowledge — would also be wise. Such an introduction would inculcate key intellectual values: objectivity, fair-mindedness and critically aware open-mindedness. It also naturally fosters a climate for informed public support of basic and applied research.
- ✓ Similarly, education in such areas as Civics/Social Studies, History, Geography and General Studies should foster a critically aware, but sympathetic appreciation for diverse cultures and patterns of governance across both space and time. Such studies should also equip students for responsible citizenship, and should expose them to the skills needed to contribute to the ongoing work of deliberation, development and reform that are a vital part of Caribbean life today. Of course, educators will have to avoid the imposition of ideologies and agendas in so exposing students.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the above, we may see that the issue of truth in general, and that of the truth of the gospel in particular, lurk under the issues connected with our ongoing debate over values education. Let us therefore discuss the issues and concerns in that wider context, respecting both the value of truth and the fact of diversity. Then, in light of our deliberations, let us develop a sound, balanced, fair-minded strategy for education in values and virtues in our community as we cross the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium.