

DON BOSCO'S PEDAGOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 19th CENTURY

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As an educator Don Bosco presents us with a genuine paradox: on the one hand he is everywhere known and recognised as a great educator, a professional of exceptional quality, whose example was capable of activating and inspiring the religious Institutes and the spiritual family which he brought into existence; on the other hand, one hesitates to recognise him as a real educationalist, one whose educational theory merits a special place for him in the history of his century. He is depicted and perceived too exclusively as possessed of a special charisma that derived from his holiness and from divine grace; insufficient attention has been paid to the way his ideas, quite independently of his personality, fit into the history of educational theory or how the questions he raised fit into the general problems of his age. The result is that we fail to evaluate rightly the innovations that he introduced.

We need to try to correct this paradoxical and undoubtedly deficient image. I shall first define more clearly the reasons for and the parameters of this approach, and shall then attempt, in comparison with the predominant theories of his age, to pick out the precise role that he assigned to education, with the preconditions that he saw as necessary for its fulfilment and the theory that underpinned that approach.¹

1. The reasons for an omission

Despite some recent progress, very little has been done in France on the history of education, and of St. John Bosco there is not the slightest mention. This is one thing that all the classical texts have in common: he is totally ignored.

¹ For more ample information for what has been touched upon in this paper cf. G. AVANZINI, *La pédagogie de St. Jean Bosco, en son siècle*, in: G. AVANZINI (edit.), *Éducation et pédagogie chez Don Bosco*, Paris, Fleurus 1988, pp. 55-93.

This silence is rightly attributed to the dominant secularism which in many French publications either partially or, at times, almost wholly clouds the perception of the history of education. But this explanation, although to some extent inevitable, does not fully account for the omission. In fact, while many Italian Salesians have done detailed research on the founder, the French Salesians, Desramaut excepted, seem to have neglected this aspect of his work, or have concentrated more on an edifying, hagiographical, rather than a scientific, historical approach.

Of course, one reason for this omission is that it is not easy to pin down Don Bosco's educational theory; it is nowhere presented after the fashion of a classic exposition. Any formulation is fragmentary and the absence of any work of synthesis makes it difficult to perceive the underlying unity. His presentation seems divorced from any academic trends or contemporary political utterances regarding education. Students of his life accordingly question whether any firm formulation of his theory is legitimate and what status should be accorded to his writings on this topic. Oddly enough, Don Auffray questions whether one can really talk about a «system» (the term used by Don Bosco himself), or a «doctrine» or a «method». Is it possible, therefore, to call him a «great educator», if he was no educationalist?

The answer demands that we attempt to define more clearly the influence that Don Bosco had on his times, and to decide what precisely it was about him that caused him to be ignored by educational experts. What divergent views are represented in the writings of his biographers and how are we to explain the prejudicial reluctance to study his place in education?

2. Why Don Bosco opted for education

The first question to answer is why did this Italian priest of the 19th century decide to devote himself to education rather than to other forms of pastoral activity. What was the justification for his choice? In other words, what function did he assign to education? What precisely did he expect or hope to achieve by it?

His limited but intense awareness of the way young people were affected by the social conditions in the Sardinian States, in Piedmont, and in Liguria, and of the measures needed in response, could have led him to either of two quite different strategies. He could have decided that renewal and development of education was the best, even the only remedy, since all lasting social progress is achieved only through the progress of individual people. This was the strategy supported by numerous thinkers which led to the foundation of many congregations on behalf of the young in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. He could, on the other hand, have concluded that a change in education could not be his prime target since the goals of education are deter-

mined by the political powers-that-be, and not vice-versa: the political powers highjack education and use it for their own ends; hence the futility of any private attempt to reform education. That was precisely the dominant view in the 19th century, especially in the second half of the century. It motivated those who strove for democratic government; only the latter could ensure progressive educational legislation, which would, in turn, strengthen their own position. The Italian liberals, therefore, saw no hope for the improvement of education without first a political and constitutional change. They did not believe the opposite process to be feasible.

One might have imagined that Don Bosco would be in favour of political intervention, especially as this seemed a distinct possibility during the reign of Carlo Alberto. And yet such was not the case. Not only did he not advocate it, he strongly advised against it. He repeatedly condemned any such efforts, forbidding his religious to get involved and many times insisted that the prohibition should be written into the Constitutions of his Society. He would tolerate only efforts at social and educational improvement.

This attitude is totally consistent with his general thinking and is even demanded by it. His refusal to be involved in politics does not proceed, as one might think, from the related Roman question; it is motivated rather by his grave reservations concerning the approach of the political militants. Although he advocated social reforms, Don Bosco had a horror for confrontation and polemics. His fear was that democratic ideas, despite the faith intrinsically placed in them by certain Christian movements, would have harmful consequences and lead to the encouragement for liberalism, socialism and anticlericalism. Worse still, to attach exaggerated importance to the political sphere courted the danger, in his eyes, of over-valuing what was temporal, whereas what is important is not this world but the next. Hence any dangerous emphasis on earthly happiness and material systems would be an error, since it would be detrimental to the one goal that really mattered, the achieving of eternal happiness. The problem was not one of economic but spiritual alienation, because excessive preoccupation with politics led one to overlook one's final end, which is heaven itself, in favour of an earthly objective.

Having thus rejected political militancy, Don Bosco supported wholeheartedly those who concentrated on education: only education leads a person to know, love and internalise the ideas worthy of man, in accordance with a strict hierarchy of values. Consequently, he assigned to education a twofold finality, the first of which was strictly spiritual: to teach the truth regarding faith and morals in order to help man achieve salvation; and, secondly, to «form honest citizens» by providing them with professional qualifications which, especially in the case of young workers, would enable them to play their part in society. A person armed with a trade qualification would be less exposed to temptations and their consequences than would an idle person.

Such thinking set him apart even from Catholic educationalists of his time. They, of course, also wanted education to help in the salvation of souls, but they had a different view of the importance that was to be attached to material reality and, therefore, to action in the temporal order, especially regarding the compromises and half-measures that some seemed to advocate in their excessive enthusiasm for human objectives. Don Bosco was afraid that excessive dedication to the task of building the earthly city would diminish and render peripheral the kind of labour which alone is worthy of the city of God.

Any action to help souls would, however, be fruitless, unless the educand was capable of benefitting from it. An accompanying condition was, therefore, the subject's educability, which in turn called for malleability and the willingness to improve. In Don Bosco's thinking the person to be educated plays a key role, in marked contrast to the generally accepted thinking of his period. This point needs to be made very clear, no matter how unlikely or paradoxical it may seem. The boys that Don Bosco wanted to help were the underprivileged, the misfits, the maladjusted, the delinquents, the corrupted, at times even the perverted, those labelled by the sociologists and psychologists of the time as irremedial, beyond improvement. In spite of all these indications to the contrary Don Bosco stubbornly insisted that these boys could be improved: he rejected all fatalism, no matter what the theories, opinions or experience that seemed to support it.

This confidence in people is only a reflection of the trust that God displays by entrusting to each person his or her own peculiar talents, talents which each should be helped to recognise, in order to make good use of them.

This confidence had nothing in common with the optimism of Rousseau; it was based not on the goodness of «nature», an idea that Don Bosco deeply distrusted, but on the goodness of the Creator, of whom the creature is an authentic image. Don Bosco's «spirituality» accordingly, as Desramaut has demonstrated, was not just one aspect of his educational thinking, but lay at the very heart of his belief in man's educability. He rejected the deterministic, fatalistic explanations produced by the fanciful theories of the day that predated the findings of dynamic psychology. Such fatalism affirmed that a person's intellectual endowment was not open to influence and so all possibilities were equal; personal qualities, especially personal defects, were a «given» of nature. Perversions of character were constitutionally inbred; defects of nature were a matter of heredity; and hence a rigoristic and repressive response to them was easily justifiable.

3. An original element in his choice of education

Don Bosco did not opt immediately or unconditionally for schools as a means of achieving his aims. His attitude calls for further systematic investigation, but the present findings of such research seem to indicate that his position was deeply ambivalent. Not that he rejected or neglected schooling: his conviction that growth in knowledge assists moral development made him wish that all could attend school and receive the general and professional training that was requisite for their own intellectual development and for the evolution of society. He accordingly founded establishments, especially boarding schools, worked out a programme of real technical training, laboured to remedy illiteracy, wrote a textbook on mathematics and, on a more general level, did a lot of work publishing and disseminating numerous books.

He realized, nevertheless, that the process of secularization was not yet universal and that, in any case, the secular world abandoned the youngsters it was supposed to benefit as they reached adolescence, leaving them perilously exposed and without anyone to whom they could appeal for protection. The dangerous lacuna between childhood and adulthood needed to be filled with some means of support. Moreover, was there not a danger that, as this gap grew and became a more widespread problem, there was an accompanying tendency for schools to become less and less the places where Christian faith and morals were inculcated? Wouldn't schools become ever more concerned with temporal goals, subserving individual ambition, promoting a spirit of criticism and even of secularism? Didn't they already attach too much importance to the study of Greco-Roman civilization, with its pagan concept of man?

Don Bosco, therefore, had faith in education, while distrusting many schools. While he shared with many educators the desire for cultural improvement, the youngsters that he wanted to benefit were rather different; he also was aware of his limited resources and of the ambiguous nature of his task. We can say, somewhat antithetically, that his task was to educate difficult adolescents from urban surroundings, whilst the dominant trend was rather to instruct suitable or «normal» children from either rural or middle-class backgrounds,

He thus felt that he had to create new institutions that accorded with his educational aims and with the category of young people to be educated. He laboured all through his life to achieve this goal. And, in so far as the task was beyond any one man, especially if it was to continue after his death, it was necessary to give to his foundations a character that would guarantee their continuity and stability. Hence his desire to establish the Salesian Co-operators and even to found a new congregation.

These initiatives seemed to involve certain contradictions. Initially they

seemed highly original, because all contemporary interest and argument was centred on primary schools. A more informed assessment might recognise that he was merely sharing the concern felt by many priests and religious of his time over urbanization and the growing numbers of the proletariat, together with the consequent moral misery of disadvantaged adolescents. We are still deplorably ignorant of many of these initiatives; they still need to be integrated into the history of education or at least studied in the context of educational problems. They were certainly numerous. But it is the radical originality of Don Bosco's *method* that must be underlined, since it showed him to be a real innovator. He never actually pretended to be the «inventor» of the «preventive system», which he contrasted with the «repressive system»; this may have been due to modesty or, more likely, to his wish to ward off the distrust or hostility that would be aroused by a claim to originality on his part. He wisely chose patrons: St. Alphonsus de Liguori, St. Philip Neri, St. Francis de Sales, Mons. Dupanloup, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, etc. But in one aspect his originality was total, and that was the way he made everything depend on affection «expressed in a way that was perceptible», an affection that was uninhibited and genuine, deeply felt and free from all pretence or affectation.

This was really a break with other traditions. He was not afraid of friendship, despite the risks it involved. It was not to be simulated but proved by deeds. Nor was it something that he advised only for the rare possessors of a special charisma or for one of the adult élites. He proposes a model that is difficult, since it is capable of being abused, yet at the same time truly good, and it is the one that he tirelessly and unhesitatingly recommends to his religious.

Many of those who recognise the preventive role of education make this dependent on punitive regimentation, following a strong current within Christian educational tradition. Others behave differently, but only because they discount the seductive power of evil, or make the mistake of thinking all childhood tendencies are somehow sacred; this is the temptation to indulge in a Rousseau-style, naturalistic optimism. Don Bosco, for his part, wanted the preventive function of education to be achieved through an equally preventive method. Don Vecchi has summed it up admirably: «one has to speak of education *as* prevention rather than of prevention *in* education».

4. Don Bosco the «educationalist»

We must go a step further and acknowledge in Don Bosco a new kind of awareness that could be applied to education. In my opinion he genuinely proposed a pedagogical method or complex of coordinated insights into edu-

cation; he is, therefore, an educationalist, in the strict sense of the word, and not «merely» an educator.

One must first of all recognise that he had a «theory», or what we may at least call a theoretical approach: in contrasting the repressive system and the preventive system he wished to incorporate, in a judgement that was of universal application, the ways of determining the approach to education through the centuries. He thus enunciates a theory which can be used for the general interpretation of history.

He was not however content merely to describe; he wished, above all, to prescribe establishing aims, norms, principles and an ideal. He justified the use of the preventive system by explaining his reasons for using it. If this is not a theory it is at the least an approach backed up by theory.

On the basis of these norms he organized a *method*, explaining in detail just how it was to be applied. He indicated not only the «why» but the «how», ensuring that it would be faithfully followed in the houses of his congregation. He demonstrates firmly its suitability and admonishes everyone who forgets to practise it. He does not present it merely as a pragmatic method but bases it upon principles.

In fine, by studying the twin parameters of the educational process (the goal to be achieved and the part played by the educand), by devising institutions and methods which corresponded to those twin parameters and by imparting an internal coherence to all the heterogeneous variables, he created a «system». The modern acceptance of this notion, thanks to his systematic approach, serves merely to confirm the legitimate use of this word which Don Bosco himself adopted.

His approach was certainly radically different from that which was prevalent in his day: he did not adopt the jargon then in common use, he did not indulge in academic discussion, he did not produce a methodological analysis of his procedures, nor did he attempt an epistemological evaluation of his experience. He stood aside from the academic tradition, from its demands and expectations; his approach did not lend itself to that kind of validation. Moreover, since his method depended so much on personal relationships, which he deemed essential for success in education, he did not share the growing desire of educationalists to elaborate fool-proof methods which would depend not on any ability to relate but purely on the intrinsic correctness of the process adopted, as is the case in the technological field. He thus formed no part of the vast movement which, influenced by developments in the natural sciences and by the philosophy of Comte, emerged and flourished throughout the 19th century. This movement, with its aim of establishing a real science of education, became a scientific object of study in the universities.

Don Bosco, although aware of it, never referred to or depended upon this scientific trend which, with its experimental approach, was becoming

ever more widely accepted. He did not, for example, favour the proposal, amply illustrated in the epistemology of Alfred Binet, to extend to education the use of procedures which Claude Bernard had successfully applied to biology. Because he did not associate himself with the new discipline being set up by contemporaries and because he did not share either their approach to problems or their way of solving them, he ran the risk of not being recognised by them as an educationalist. This explains why professional experts ignored him and why, indeed, they largely continue to do so.

And yet the method which has till now led to his being overlooked could well become the very proof of his modernity. It is surprisingly true that the elements which kept him aloof from the theoreticians of his day are precisely the ones that cause him to influence those of today. Should we not, perhaps, even if it involves straining words a little, discern in his approach the features which H. Desroche sees as the distinguishing marks of «action-research»? Is it not, perhaps, permissible to see in Don Bosco's method a first outline of that process which makes action the object of reflection in order to highlight its significance, increase its efficiency and turn it into the material of further knowledge? Was not Don Bosco, in fact, adopting, in his own way, the «methodology of objectivity», which is, in brief, the procedure most advocated and perhaps most relevant in educational research? It seems to me that all this confirms his contemporary significance and gives him an important place in the history of education.

Ch. Delorme has distinguished between «universal models», which one ought to be able to reproduce unconditionally, and «communicable models» which are «sufficiently theoretical to be capable of application in a different formative environment, once they have been adapted to its peculiar demands, while being at the same time interchangeable and comparable with other model-type propositions». Don Bosco was the creator of a typical «communicable model», and it is easy to see why.

He was different from his century in certain important respects. He stood out, first of all, on account of the role that he assigned to education and the final goal which was to be reached through education as also on account of his belief in the educability of the young. He was also different in his ambivalence about schools and in his desire to promote another type of institution which he considered more suited to providing for the social needs of boys at risk and for the wider needs of boys in general. Above all, his method was quite distinctive, and merited the title of «preventive system», because of his considered application of means in order to achieve certain clearly defined ends. Finally, he was distinctive in the way that he produced a new kind of perception of the educational process that was not reducible to mere empirical improvisation or to scientific behaviourism.

This multi-faceted approach explains why he has been neglected; it does not, however, indicate any loss of impetus, or any intrinsic weakness or de-

iciency. His approach was the result of clear-sighted views that anticipated the future and merited the increasingly world-wide acceptance which has been won for them through the creative fidelity of his spiritual family, fidelity of the kind that is demonstrated, as Desramaut has pointed out, in the Oratory of St. Peter in Nice, or in the orphanage of the Boy Jesus in Nazareth. Those views justify the demand that this educator, who was not understood or recognised in the 19th century, should now be made the object of university research and recognised as an educationalist for the 20th century who can stand amongst the greatest.