

Are these teaching examples “distinctively Christian”?

Once we begin looking at our teaching practices in connection with Christian faith, sooner or later the question arises as to whether the ideas proposed are distinctively Christian. The question can arise from critics or from sympathizers. On the one hand, there is a concern from some that particular ideas and practices may be claimed by Christians as something tied to Christian faith when in fact they could have come from other sources. Perhaps, it is suggested, Christians are claiming too much in calling a particular teaching practice Christian. On the other hand, some worry that practices proposed as part of Christian approaches to education are not distinctive enough, that they should be more different from things other people might do if we are really to claim that they are Christian. Perhaps, this concern suggests, something more obviously radical is needed.

It is of course quite possible in any particular instance that either of these concerns might be appropriate and justified. It is certainly possible for Christians to mistakenly claim something as their own, just as it is possible for them to be too uncritically conformed to the cultural practices around them. There are, however, more things to consider before accepting the horns of this particular dilemma.

Is difference the goal?

First, it is worth questioning the degree to which difference in itself should be our goal. Perhaps the primary concern should be faithfulness and consistency rather than comparisons with what others happen to be doing. Our task as Christian teachers is to find ways of teaching that are genuinely consistent with our Christian faith and genuinely educationally helpful to students. Sometimes this might drive us to make choices that are rather different from standard practice in the wider educational world; sometimes it might lead us to affirm, for Christian reasons, practices that are also affirmed by others. Either way, the most important question is whether we are really being faithful to our Christian calling, not how similar our actions are to someone else's. Christians see God's grace at work in the world in many ways, and can rejoice when the work of others who do not share their faith reflects a little of that grace.

What about history?

Second, in the western world talk about what is distinctively Christian is complicated by history. Our cultural heritage has been shaped by various sources, including Ancient Rome and Greece, but it includes an enormous Christian influence. Ideas and practices that are now habitually thought of as 'secular' or are even associated with other belief systems may well have had their roots in or been influenced by past Christian contributions to culture. This makes drawing a sharp dividing line

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between Christian practices and those of the wider culture more complex. Sometimes Christian ideas are similar to ideas that are more widely present in society not because Christianity has nothing to contribute, but because the society itself still contains and operates out of echoes of its Christian history.

What is distinctiveness?

Third, reflect for a moment on how difference and identity work. Consider your own uniqueness as an individual. It is likely that there are at least a few other people in the world who have exactly the same nose as you, others who share your exact hair or eye color, others who went to the same school, others who share your first or last name or even both, others who ate the same meal that you did yesterday evening. What makes you distinctively you? Would we have to go looking for the one hidden feature that was different from everyone else in order to find what could really be said to be you, and then discount everything that was shared with others as not really belonging to your identity? Are you for example your fingerprints? Surely not. Your identity is a particular combination of features that, taken one by one, may not in themselves be unique. Your identity is woven from the particular way in which many features and experiences, each of which taken separately might be similar to others, are combined into a distinctive pattern.

Compare the Christian practice of the Eucharist (or communion), breaking bread in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. Baking bread isn't distinctively Christian, nor is breaking it and eating it. Others beside Christians also drink wine and share meals together. Others even share meals to commemorate past events. But communion becomes a Christian practice when all of these elements come together and are informed by the Christian story. You could go through exactly the same outward motions without reference to Christian faith and you would not be engaged in the same practice. Christian faith patterns and renews the things of this world, it does not put us in another world entirely.

Similarly, taken piecemeal and one by one it may well turn out that many of the particular actions suggested in the examples on this site could be adopted or invented by teachers of various beliefs. We make no large claim that at the level of individual strategies these examples are unique to Christians, though many of them occurred to the teachers concerned because of their faith. We are more concerned with whether they represent a way of teaching that is faithful for Christians, and we suggest that it is when the individual examples come together into a consistent pattern over time and get connected with the Christian story that we can talk about distinctively Christian teaching. It's a matter of building a rich whole that is informed by faith, not of whether each component part is trademarked.