

## Pamela Mackenzie (education among tribals)

### Charles Strohmer talks with Dr. Pamela Mackenzie about Christianity, Wholistic Education, and Her Work in Tribal Regions

Are Christian schools really all that Christian? What influence can Christian teachers have in secular classrooms? Why are the Western educational models that have been exported into non-Western nations failing? How are issues like justice, economics, and relationships tied to education? Is it possible to have Jesus Christ as the center of every subject of the curriculum? These and many other topics came up in the following conversation with Dr. Pamela MacKenzie, author, teacher, cross-cultural educational consultant, and founder of the [International Network for Development](#). Her frank and enlightening answers may surprise you.

She works in education research and training with both U.K.-based and international government and non-government organizations (NGOs). She is also the author of the ground-breaking, major book *Entry Points for Christian Reflection in Education* (with Alison Farnell, Ann Holt, and David Smith). *Entry Points* is an irenic approach to thinking Christianly about a wide variety of school subjects. It draws from a vast amount of research and its wealth of examples in each subject are laid out in kind of workbook format. Traditional approaches to education may do nothing other than sustain inadequate educational ideologies. "We need a different way of reasoning about education."

Dr. MacKenzie has been working for many years in India with InfD, alongside state and national governments, academic institutions, and NGOs on numerous projects, including a multilingual education program in tribal areas. This entails scripting the languages, developing culturally relevant curriculum, teacher training, workshops, and more. The program has recently received the backing of UNESCO, UNICEF, and other NGOs.

Despite her successes, Dr. MacKenzie is a realist about the educational possibilities of schools in our pluralistic world today, and she is aware of the ambiguities, paradoxes, and even contradictions that Christian teachers and parents must live with. She has a passion to play a part in seeing the field of education redeemed, which, she says, is not just about having more money, or the right kind of buildings, or the latest classroom technology, or home schooling, or even calling the schools "Christian." Traditional approaches, MacKenzie told me, "may do nothing other than sustain inadequate Western educational ideologies. Much more is needed. We need a different way of reasoning about education." (Dr. MacKenzie spoke to Charles Strohmer by phone from London for this conversation, originally published in *Openings* #6, Jan-Mar, 2000. Slightly edited, here, for the Web.)

**CS:** One of your special interests is looking at the different philosophies, beliefs, and values behind education theories. How did you get interested in that?

**PM:** I started to think seriously about this when I was doing my master's. It occurred to me that none of the philosophies behind education that I was then studying were adequate for what human beings really are or what we were created to be, or what a teacher or a child should be. For instance, there has been this pendulum swing between the two broad ideas of "traditional" and "progressive" education. In the traditional, a body of knowledge gets passed on to the learner because the learner doesn't really know anything. It's about getting the right facts and information, passing tests. Very academic. Progressive education is child-centered. It tries to develop the child by finding out what the child has inside it already. There's not so much guidance or structure in this system. You give the children activities, so it's not just knowledge from books or from the teacher. Both ideologies are inadequate. Academic knowledge alone ignores important areas of learning as well as the differences in a child's gifts and attitudes. At the other end of the spectrum, while the child is important and the focus is generally wider than just academic knowledge, what a child is capable of learning can be restricted.

**CS:** This hints at the question of educational ethos. For instance, it's pretty evident that in the West the entire educational exercise serves an economic determinism, no matter what kind of school we're talking about. Are we stuck with this?

**PM:** It's difficult to get around this, even if you're setting up Christian schools, because people have got to learn how to make a living. But when economics is the ultimate goal, then you devalue all the other things that are important to education, and to life. So

you need an alternative view of what money is all about. You need what I call a ?God perspective.?

**CS:** What about knowledge? Isn't education mainly about that?

**PM:** If education is about knowledge, then what knowledge is all about becomes vital. Years ago I began to see that with the erosion of Judeo-Christian values in our societies, we haven't actually got a foundation from which to determine where reason or rationality even comes from. So I studied what the Scriptures say about the foundation of knowledge, which led me to what a human being is and where we should be getting our values from. I learned that it's not just about academic knowledge. It's also about what the Scriptures would call heart knowledge, so knowledge carries with it personal responsibility, because when we know things we need to act on them responsibly. Then I looked into the responsibility parents have to bring the child up within certain parameters, and who are children, and what as teachers are our responsibilities toward them. Caring for things, looking after things, is part of the Bible's understanding of knowledge. So we have a moral responsibility, under God, to the things we know, and this must influence how we teach. Once you've got knowledge, what are you responsibly going to do with it?

**CS:** We almost need to start at the beginning, don't we? Ask basic questions of things, especially the big ideas we take for granted, and then let the Scriptures become part of our instruction about the answers.

**PM:** Precisely. What is knowledge? What is a child? What is a teacher? What is education? What is school? When you do this kind of thinking with the Scriptures, it becomes clear how greatly its ideas contrast with contemporary ideas on these topics. For instance, teachers in the area of technology could develop values-questions to help students to think beyond what they would normally think about the inventions of science and technology. Take a car or computer. They might ask questions like: what is it, what is it for, who benefits from it, who does not, what will happen if you do this or that with it, how will the environment be affected by it? Questions like this, about responsibility, are not usually asked, particularly when only money is involved.

**CS:** How does Christianity fit into this?

**PM:** I can remember first seeing this put into practice. I met a teacher in a Christian school who was really speaking a language I wanted to hear in the schools. She had a different philosophical underpinning.... It was trying not to be just a Christianized version of the academic paradigm. It was trying to prepare children for the world and for relationships out of an understanding that put God and Christ at the center of everything that was learned?all the subjects?history, geography, science, maths?right the way through the whole curriculum. This meant, for instance, that history had a beginning and a purpose and is going somewhere. This is important for the Christian because it means that every aspect of the curriculum some link with what God is doing and fits into a whole pattern. With history, for instance, it is to at history quite differently from what students usually get from that subject. Most of us remember getting a little of this and a little of that from history classes, and as a result, for most of us history made little sense, because we were not seeing any big pattern or ultimate purpose. Nothing was holding history together. It's all just random, often unrelated, acts. That's what history often feels like as it's taught in the schools.

**CS:** Can this Christian approach to curriculum approach be implemented in the state schools? I'm thinking in particular about the situation in the U.S., where the ?separation of church and state? is an organizing principle in our public schools.

**PM:** Your situation is somewhat different from ours in the U.K., where we have assemblies and RE (religious education), which has to be ?broadly and in the main Christian? (a principle in government policy documents) and a curriculum based on the schools stated values, all of which are required by the government. But even so, there are approaches teachers can take. A lot depends on how you handle it. In the U.K., for instance, we have followed the principle of not indoctrinating the children. So if a teacher taught in a way that stopped students from having choices, it would be very much decried. In the U.K., the Association of Christian Teachers and CARE for Education work to implement approaches that challenge the status quo, the accepted norms. Christians as teachers in state schools are not at a total loss. They just need to learn a way of reasoning from their biblical base in a way that doesn't offend the governmental powers or the children. They don't have to be talking overtly about God, Jesus, or the Bible to do this, even in controversial areas like sex education. And they don't have to be using religious language.

**CS:** You were in Yemen for many years.

**PM:** I went in 1978 and taught there for 9 years, in an American-based system, mostly primary. I left when the head introduced a new academic system that I didn't agree with, at all. Also, I had been wanting to go back home to do my master's degree, so it seemed like the right time to leave.

**CS:** What was the system you didn't agree with?

**PM:** Outcome-based education. It has a philosophy that it doesn't matter how long it takes a child to learn something, they have to keep teaching it till they learn it. From my perspective it lacks creativity, both on the part of the teacher and the student. The student has to jump through all these hoops?that's how it felt?which might not be the right kind of hoops for that child to jump through. It was hard leaving. I loved it there. It was quite an international group. We had 27 different nationalities in that school. Since then I've done consulting work or taught in several other nations, including teaching gypsies in England. One of my current serious interests is in India.

**CS:** What are your cross-cultural experiences, such as in India, teaching you as a Westerner about education?

**PM:** The biggest difficulty is that we import our Western models of education into these non-Western cultures. Looking at a Christian philosophy of education helped me immensely, here, for instance, when I started working in India several years ago. It's a historical thing. Back in Colonial times, we in Britain exported our educational models into cultures that thought in completely different ways than we did. This molded those peoples into something which was culturally inadequate for them because it wasn't thinking in way they thought. So today they have Western-style education systems that are very strong on rote memorization of facts and information, and very little else. The children pass tests and show wonderful results, but there's little creativity. The children are not taught to think for themselves or how to criticize or develop new understandings.

**CS:** What do you mean when you suggest that Westerners and non-Westerns think differently, and how does that affect our education among them?

**PM:** Well, it's complicated. A simple illustration would be that in the West we think in abstract logical ways and tend to classify things in what we would think of as their logical order. I once showed a group of Westerners a picture of an axe, a hammer, a log, and a saw, and then asked them which ones went together. For them, the axe, the hammer, and saw went together because they're all tools; the log was the odd man out. When the same question was asked of a tribal group in Thailand (I think it was), they put the axe, the saw, and the log together, because you could do something with them. The hammer was excluded because you haven't got a nail, so you can't do anything with the hammer. Being concrete functional thinkers, they grouped the things together in a different way. A curriculum based on abstract logical thinking would fail them. So it's essential that we understand the cultures where we teach. We British took a lot from these cultures, and maybe through education we were trying to give something back. But we gave it back on our own terms. So one of the big issues now is that Western ways are not so welcome any more in many of the cultures where Western education has not been sensitive to a culture's way of thinking and learning.

**CS:** And India?

**PM:** There are a whole lot of issues. I'm working in many different capacities with a tribal group that has their own language, but it's never been scripted. So it's an oral language. There is education coming into the region, but it's in the official language of the state rather than in the tribe's mother tongue, which means that the tribal people are learning in a second language right from the beginning. So we're working to get their language scripted. But it's never that simple. In the tribal regions, one of the biggest headaches is just trying to get education going. For instance, where I go in India, their land has been taken away from them (this is common around the world with indigenous groups), so you begin to see how issues of justice are directly related to education. For instance, corporations and investors may come into forest areas and all the trees are cut down for wood or to make farms to raise cattle. Instead of the tribes living off the forest like they used to, now they have to work on these new farms, and for a pittance. The tribal people have not had the education to understand what is going on. If someone from the West says to one of them, ?Here's a radio for your piece of land,? they'll have the radio. Selling the birthright for a pittance. That's how it was there. How does education address the injustice? A Christian education would.

**CS:** So a teacher coming in from the West may suddenly find herself facing unlooked-for challenges that have a direct bearing on educational redemption.

**PM:** That's right. Here's another example. A terrible problem in the tribal group where I work stemmed from its connections with a large Western European Christian denomination, which pumped a lot of money into the area for all kinds of developments?agriculture, health, education, and so on. But they wanted everything done their way, according to their plans, and not according to the tribal culture or its church. This became quite manipulating and dominating. Eventually, the tribal church saw that

they had to extricate themselves from this denominational control, which they finally have been able to do. It was very difficult. To further complicate matters, while all this was going on, there was the issue of loss of land. The head of the tribal church, and Indian man, worked extremely hard for a long time with the government in the area of the legal rights of the people to get the land back for them. Which now has happened. With the big denomination out of the picture, and because the people have their land back, the head of the tribal church is now working with the people to develop the agriculture so that they can become more independent and the church more self-supporting. They have experienced the problems of being dominated by outsiders telling them what to do culturally and how to run their church or their schools. It was a modern day equivalent to what was going on in India during the Colonial. In essence, the denomination was saying, you don't know how to develop yourselves, or your culture, or hear from God, or run your church. It made them overly dependent on the outside and eventually they resented that. So we've got to go to serve in a whole different attitude than what we've had in the past.

**CS:** What do you mean by 'a whole different attitude'?

**PM:** I think it has to begin with relationships, building relationships of trust. Of course we know this, we say it with our heads, but we haven't really taken it to heart because we are so project-and-task-oriented in the West. So we assess everything we do in terms of 'achievement.' We want to see 'results.' And this usually comes at the expense of relationships. What I'm suggesting changes the emphasis. What I'm talking about can't be done by going in to do our projects, to impose our vision. It's got to be done under their vision. There may be things that we don't like about what's going on, which we'll have to work out with them. But that's the point. We'll work it out with them, in the building of our relationships, not by dominating, or manipulating, or implementing our projects. We'll serve them.

**CS:** How do you build up the kind of trust you're suggesting?

**PM:** You just go and be with the people. Live with them, in their mud huts. Wear their clothes. Eat their food. Share your life with them. Become a friend. They get to know you, you get to know them. Go and serve them in the way that they want you to serve. It takes a long time. Only after years of going to India did we begin to see that we were all getting somewhere, and we've all had to go through a lot to get there. It really is a different approach. It's not so much any more simply a matter taking things in for them to use. You might think, I'll take this in because this is what they need because our culture needs it. And so you take it in. But a year later you see it still sitting on a shelf somewhere. It's not used because it's not what their culture needs. What I'm suggesting is at the heart of the gospel—a relationship. I mean, what are we actually doing? The heart of the gospel is relationship with Christ, and this has got to work its way out into the whole of our relationships. Often it's not, though, because we're so much 'doing things.' So we miss out on the relationships that would be possible. This is one of the reasons, by the way, that families and parents have so much difficulty being seriously involved in their children's educational process. I can't say enough about the importance of developing good relationships. I mean, it's almost incidental that I go into India as an educator. I go in as a person, seeking to build relationships, and this leads to the most surprising ways in which to serve.

Recently, I arrived there right after a typhoon had done a massive amount of damage in Orissa—right next door to the tribal group where I go. The tribal group and church that I work with has relationships with groups who were ruined by the typhoon, so everyone was pitching in and working very hard to rescue the situation, but there wasn't enough of anything, blankets, saris, food, clothing, whatever. I get off the plane, and this is what I find. So forget about what I wanted to do there that trip. I changed my plans and got involved. Soon I was sending a fax to my church in London, and within hours they raised and sent us £6,700 (\$10,000). Relationships. Having my plans changed, however, meant that unlooked-for possibilities arose. For instance, working for weeks on the typhoon relief effort led to a meeting I'll soon have in London with a Christian woman I've never met. She is a member of the House of Lords and wants to go to India with me as soon as possible. Through her contacts she can get a lot of things done in development in areas where we have been stuck. It's quite an opportunity because the tribal church has set up and runs seventeen schools. And there's more to come. So on and on it goes. Building good relationships has been the key.

**CS:** Again, justice and cultural issues are systemic with education.

**PM:** That's right. One amazing up-coming project is working with the government to release 600 children from bonded labor, slavery. Because of the extreme poverty, families may sell some of their children to farmers, or to the wealthy to work in their homes. The children then become the permanent property of whoever has bought them. Often there's sexual abuse, especially of the girls. But selling the children is illegal, so the tribal church is working with government to free these children through legal means.

But once you get them out, you can't give them back to their families because they'll just get sold again. So you have to provide an alternative. One alternative is to give them an education that teaches them how to live, to earn, to provide for themselves. So, you've got the reclaiming the land and now the reclaiming the children. And education is part of that redemptive process. And I just found out that it's only going to take £10 (\$16) a month to care for one of these children. If we could get just 600 families to . . .

**CS:** Those are very moving stories, with a lot to think about. You seem to be a very flexible educator, and I'm sure that comes out of your Christian understanding of education. Talk a little more overtly about that. For instance, how did that influence your writing of *Entry Points*, which is a major book, and establishing your International Network for Development?

**PM:** INFd is a charitable trust ([www.infed.org.uk](http://www.infed.org.uk)) that we set up to facilitate responses to the growing number of opportunities I'm getting to provide resources and training in formal and non-formal educational contexts, especially among marginalized groups. It's really about bringing professionalism and a Christian rationale to the education enterprise. There's a lot to it. Providing multilingual education, curriculum development, health education, adult basic education, vocational training, and so on. I wrote *Entry Points* with three colleagues, Alison Farnell, Ann Holt, and David Smith. The book is about having Christ at the heart of every subject in the curriculum. We tried to find out what Christian teachers were already doing, how they were implementing the faith in the classroom, in the subjects. We drew from a wide variety of sources, right the way through from classroom management to curriculum ideas for virtually every subject. In particular, we looked at ways in which teachers were trying to heal the dualisms of Western culture through the curriculum. That is, there is often a separation between the religious side of the curriculum (RE and assemblies) and the rest of the curriculum, which is 'secular.' The idea of *Entry Points* ([www.pedagogy.net](http://www.pedagogy.net) [Resources page]) was to find teachers who were bringing their faith into the area of the curriculum in which they taught, to see how this was being implemented. The book is intended to help teachers to think about how they can implement Christian values across their actual work, no matter which subject.

**CS:** Are you suggesting that Christian schools might not be so biblical in their way of reasoning about education?

**PM:** Absolutely. Particularly the longer established Christian schools. Some of the newer Christian schools have been trying to think this through, but I wouldn't say that any of them are fully biblical in any sense of the word. This is because their curriculum and values may pander to, say, the 'facts and information' agenda, such as in ACE, Accelerated Christian Education, which is an individualized book-based information program that has add-ons from the Scriptures. It doesn't heal the split between the religious and the secular.

**CS:** Saying you are a 'Christian' school is not enough?

**PM:** That's not enough to solve some of these worldview problems that have so deeply influenced us from our cultures. We can set up Christian schools and have our religious education curriculum, but then have the students leave that class and go to do maths or science or geography or music, or whatever and we don't help them to think about how God is in those subjects. They are 'just other subjects' down the hall. The implication being that most of the curriculum is split off from God. So life is viewed dualistically: God is over here in some subjects but not in others. This is not the view of the Scriptures. *Entry Points* is trying to help teachers think this through. The book is not telling teachers how to teach. It's trying to stimulate their imaginations to this whole way of thinking, how Christ is Lord of all the subjects. We Christian educators have been so deeply influenced by inadequate educational philosophies. If we start schools that are applying the old, failed categories of the dualisms, the schools do nothing to remove the humanistic-academic paradigm from how the subjects are taught. God and the Bible are merely added on to that.

There are many subtle ways that the non-Christian values influence our schools, such as when a school's science lab, or its computer equipment, or its athletic program creates a one-upmanship attitude in the students toward students in schools that don't have these things. Over the years this 'hidden curriculum' can subtly undermine Christian virtues such as humility and a willingness to serve others. Ironically, these virtues might even be overtly taught as part of a school's religious curriculum! So you have forces working against each other in the same school. Really, our Christian schools are not radical enough. We're still too influenced by non-Christian values, attitudes, and practices.

**CS:** You can see a Christian school's predominant values by doing a worldview analysis of its advertising brochure. The values bleed through the advertising.

**PM:** That's clever. But I want to emphasize, yes, let's have a good science lab and computer equipment, and let's have good test results, but let's also undergird, really undergird, the way the students approach these interests with virtues such as humility, service,



responsibility, and so on. This will make us distinctive. It's got to have a Christian worldview at the heart of it. One of our biggest problems, here, is that we've got the language of this in our heads but we don't have very consistent ways of applying it, educationally. This is where we adults have a lot of homework to do ourselves, and often in ways we don't see at first. For instance, educational authorities may be placed above biblical authority or the interests of students and parents above God's interests. So you get, for example, an emphasis on short-term goals without much, if any, emphasis on the long-term goal. Students are therefore equipped for life here but not for eternity. Why can't we teach them for both? And we haven't even discussed the role of parents, who, really, in many cases, ought to be spending much more time being involved in the schools and in their children's educations, even if that means making big changes in their lifestyles to accommodate this. These are the kinds of places we need to come to. But I just don't think we know the Bible well enough or have a relationship with God that's deep enough for us to live these alternative lifestyles. We're fed much more through our cultures than from the Scriptures.

**CS:** What you eat, you are, eh? And what is sweet now can turn so sour.

**PM:** Mmm. That says it, doesn't it. But if we really decide to, we can change with God's help. After all, that is at the heart of the gospel. And there are such tremendous rewards.

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