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From Religious Experience to Religious Response: A haven for religious education

Abstract

What is it that we "do" when we "do" religious education? It would seem logical that the practice of religious education would be founded on how its practitioners perceive the exercise and their place in it. For example, is the role of religious education to communicate faith and tradition, or to inculcate values, or to foster religious questioning? Chiasson suggests that the practice of religious education needs to undergo a fundamental shift in focus regarding its self-understanding and its practice, primarily by placing more emphasis upon a "guiding of religious response" rather than on the undergoing of religious experience.

Religious education at a crossroads

The statement that religious education has made tremendous strides since the turn of the century would meet little argument from anyone who has studied its evolution as a discipline or who has been involved in its practice for a number of years. Since it is not our task here to detail that evolution, we might simply and briefly identify three major phases that bring us to the present day (Cooney, 1972, pp.7-10).

- a) The first thirty years of this century saw an emphasis on method. There was little need for discussion of content, since faith was largely an intellectual assent to a certain body of truths, systematically summarized in religion texts. In methodology, however, there was much development in educational psychology.

- b) The second phase, beginning with the work of Josef Jungmann in the mid-thirties, suggested that the content was indeed in need of review. This period also saw the emergence of pre-evangelization as a preparatory story to receiving the revelation of the Deity. As a result, there came to be a healthy recognition of one's personal context, where one was coming from.
- c) The third phase was really transitional and has seen the emergence of contemporary religious teaching rooted in human experience. The inherent sacredness of the person and his experience are being recognized. In this phase, we are merely beginning to recognize a theology of the whole and its consequent imperatives for a religious teaching that emphasizes commitment.

And yet while we might recognize that there has been tremendous progress, we would want to argue that religious education is at an important crossroads. More correctly, religious education should be seen as always being at a crossroads; what we need to ask is "What significant issue reflects the 'crossroads' condition today?"

The search for religious meaning

We wish to suggest that the significant issue for the "crossroads" condition in religious education today is the manner in which we choose to regard the human person and human experience, and the larger context within which they fall. While the question will be phrased with varying degrees of urgency according to the particular denominational group it represents, it is an issue that emerges in all religious approaches, and, to some extent, also transcends them.

What does it mean to be human? What is our design as human persons? What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God? Are we a fallen creation or a blessed creation? Is the human person in essence fundamentally good or fundamentally evil? How are we to value human experience? What can serve as a reference point for qualitative human experience and human behaviour? Questions of this kind, while not consciously verbalized in this fashion very often, can be found in a modern malaise that seems to preclude Western, North American society.

There is a search for religious meaning being played out on the contemporary human stage and while conscious attention to this unfolding drama is frightfully minimal, it is a drama of enormous consequence depending upon which scenario is played out. One scenario would have us believe that we are on the verge of bankruptcy in terms of religious worth, that we have

increasingly castigated ourselves from a loving and caring God, and that we sit upon the precipice of immanent and certain annihilation. A quite different scenario would suggest that we are just beginning to recognize how sacred and blessed we are, that we are moving toward increased personal and global responsibility for co-creation of the kingdom of God on earth, and that our increasing self-understanding, in an individual and collective sense, is in keeping with an increasing awareness of the presence of God in our midst.

While the distance between the two scenarios appears great, they are two scenarios within one continuum, with many other scenarios between them. If the two scenarios enunciated represent opposite poles, it should be obvious that the desired context for the practice of religious education is reflected by the second scenario. Herein lies the difficulty; in both curriculum design and in practice much of contemporary religious education is rooted in the second scenario. However, the milieu, the context in which the practice of religious education is conducted - that is, the contemporary social setting - is in many ways and often rooted in the first scenario. It is as if, in a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy, the prevailing world-view in our societies were so pessimistic and demoralized that the only likely outcome would be a massive self-condemnation by default. There is nothing as hopeless as hopelessness.

Shift in focus

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist, would suggest that the most urgent need of our times is learning to see, recognizing that everything is sacred and nothing is profane. How might religious education, as a teaching ministry within the Universal Church, contribute to our "learning how to see"? It is our hope in the remainder of this paper to illustrate that what we call religious education needs to undergo a fundamental shift in focus regarding its self-understanding and its practice if it is ever to be a catalyst in the fundamental conversion of world-view and faith stance of individuals and communities, away from a crippling fatalism and pessimism toward a kingdom-building optimism.

Traditionally, we have had little difficulty in religious education communicating God's redemptive involvement in the history of humankind, and we have come a long way - such as with the Canadian Catechism in the Roman Catholic tradition - in translating an incarnational theology into a pedagogy grounded in principles of anthropology and humanistic psychology. However, we have not gone far enough. What is being called for in contemporary religious education is a widening of its perspectives in order to include the emerging theological understanding of the secular world.

The needed shift in focus in religious education can be illustrated against the background of an evolution in understanding regarding the meaning of "religious experience" which is occurring within the discipline of psychology of religion. Elsewhere we have suggested that there is a need for renewal in the discipline of psychology of religion and we have suggested how that renewal might begin (Chiasson, 1985). Our concern here, however, is a practical application of that renewal as it might affect religious education.

From religious experience to religious response

The concept of "religious experience" in its traditional usage is largely inadequate for approaching the religious behaviour and religious expression of humankind today. In the literature and in popular usage "religious experience" has been meant to refer to isolated moments of reality deemed as religious, as distinct from all other moments of reality seen as a-religious or secular. The implication has been that religious significance lies only in those moments of reality deemed as religious (religious experiences) and is not to be found elsewhere. The difficulty in holding this position of course is the overwhelming evidence for the existence of a religious consciousness outside of traditional forms. There are many persons, for example, who, while they hold no allegiance to any particular body of religious beliefs, would hold that their world-view is a religious one and that they are motivated in their action by that religious world-view.

There are many other persons as well who would insist that they hold neither a religious affiliation nor a particular religious world-view, but who would be described by many who know them as being deeply religious persons. How are we to address such examples?

What is at stake here, then, is the fundamental way we look at reality. Paul Pruyser, an American psychologist of religion, has illustrated two radically different perspectives in the two world-views we have identified. He suggests that there is a need for the restating of a principal question. "The old question was: Which are the significant data of religious experience? The new question is: Which data of experience are of religious significance?" (Pruyser, 1960).

The formulation of the new question represents an attempt to recognize that the popular conception of what are and are not religious phenomena is undergoing considerable change. Consequently, a whole range of questions with regard to religious experiencing are being raised that would never have been considered a number of years ago. We need to ask, for example, whether there is a religious significance only in instances that are popularly identified as religious experience. **Might there not be a religious significance possible in any human experience?**

If Pruyser's first question depicts where we have been in terms of public consciousness of a locale for religious significance, his second question indicates the consciousness we need to move toward - we seem to be, in this the latter part of the twentieth century, in a transition period of increasing personal and social consciousness of wholism, of sacred presence. But this perception of reality as inherently sacred is far from being a common perception.

We wish to suggest that what is called religious education could make a significant contribution to the emergence of the new perception implied in Pruyser's second question. But in order to do so religious education will have to make a painful break from an ideology that bases itself on a traditional notion of religious experience, a notion no longer adequate for the expanding religious consciousness of our day. That process might best be aided, we suggest, by adopting a new concept, not to replace the concept of "religious experience," but to move beyond the inherent limitations of that concept and to more appropriately address the perception implied in Pruyser's second question. We call this new concept, the concept of "religious response."

"Religious response", as a concept, is beginning to gain use in the circles of religious education, largely through the influence of Dr. Thomas Francoeur of McGill University. Dr. Francoeur coined the phrase a number of years ago and has addressed himself to it consistently over the course of his lengthy teaching career. Indeed it was Dr. Francoeur who planted the seed that has become the present concerns of this author with the evolution of religious education.

The possibilities for re-generation in religious education that might follow if it were to base itself upon the concept of "religious response" rather than "religious experience" can be illustrated by comparing the two terms. There is one element which is present in both "religious experience" and "religious response" and that is an element of interaction between the experiencer or the responder and a force or reality greater than he/she. The individual senses or believes himself/herself to be participating in a dimension which, while it may involve the person, extends to or originates from outside the self.

While this element is common to both "religious experience" and "religious response", there is a difference in disposition; that is, the disposition in one instance is to experience and the disposition in the other instance is to respond. The difference in disposition parallels the difference between seeking the significance of experience deemed as religious and seeking the religious significance of all experience. In the former, the "experiencer", there is an absence of alertness to an "inbreak" from within one's experience of the reality of the Ultimate and only attention to a "break-in" of the Ultimate coming from

without and into one's awareness. In the latter, the "responder," there is an openness - an alertness - to the reality of the Ultimate as it might present itself to one's awareness from the mesh of human experiencing. The "experiencer" **undergoes** (there is a significant dimension of passivity here) and the "responder" **goes to, undergoes, and goes from** (the significant dimensions here are the extending of one's self, and activity). Compared in this fashion, the concept of "religious response" has an inherent dynamism that is not present in the concept of "religious experience" and, as a consequence, could act as a significant leaven in the revitalization of religious education in a manner that "religious experience" has not been able to do.

In tandem with an inherent dynamism, the concept of "religious response" has two other dimensions or features that can contribute greatly to the revitalization of religious education, a) a dialectic of invitation and response, and b) an emphasis on the primacy of spirit in the relationship between matter and spirit.

Response follows upon invitation. Furthermore, how we respond follows upon how we perceive invitation. Seen as a dialectic, the correlation between perceived invitation and appropriate response can be observed in all forms of human behaviour. Many of our choices for action, and the intensity with which we act, will be in response to something which challenges us, calls us, something that we deem of significance, of value, something that presents itself to us as invitation. In this context, religious response means to perceive religious significance, or invitation, and then to respond accordingly, which is to say, religiously.

The guidance of religious response

A religious education which would consciously base itself on the notion of religious response would focus its energies on the issuing of invitation, or, more correctly, it would focus its energies on being a medium through which the Transcendent God reveals itself immanently, in the journey called life, as invitation. Coterminous with being a medium of invitation, religious education would be a medium of religious response. Indeed, in these terms, the practice of religious education would best be described as "the guidance of religious response", as Dr. Francoeur has named it. Appropriately, such a title for the practice of religious education would give recognition to a number of dynamics not fully appreciated in an exercise called religious education which bases itself on a too-restricted notion of religious experience. Those dynamics revolve around the free movement of the spirit of God within the whole of experience of every person, the myriad instances of attending to the presence of the sacred and responding accordingly.

Apart from the dimension of a dialectic of invitation and response, the concept of "religious response" has a second and fundamental dimension that would contribute to the revitalization of religious education understood as "the guidance of religious response". That dimension is an emphasis on the primacy of spirit in the relationship between matter and spirit. This emphasis, given its most convincing argument by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, is an essential foundation to a religious education seen as a guidance of religious response because it provides the basis for seeking religious significance in all of experience. Human motivation and human action that are consciously rooted in the conviction of the primacy of spirit, in the relationship between matter and spirit, will reject the lure of hedonism and materialism.

To place emphasis on the primacy of spirit is not to denigrate matter; indeed it is to ensure a deeper appreciation of matter because as Teilhard was at pains to explain, "spirit is made through the medium of matter" (de Chardin, 1968, p.157). Nothing less than the evolutionary journey of the universe, with all of the human family in that process, is a journey toward Spirit (de Chardin, 1968).

Teilhard sees the invitational presence of God in the unfolding human journey as that which undergirds the primacy of spirit in the relationship between matter and spirit but it is also what sacralizes the material. Much of our practice of religious education, and to a lesser extent, its underlying theory, operates as if matter were primary to spirit, or, when it does recognize the primacy of spirit, it operates as if matter were to be disdained.

When, in the context of the development of person (and this involves education), matter is accorded its due significance in the service of increase of spirit, for the sake of the whole, then we become co-creators. Religious education, understood as "the guidance of religious response", can illuminate the processes of faith development for persons if it orients them to a worship of the whole of existence as a sacral medium.

Conclusion: The spirit within

We have suggested in this paper that religious education needs to undergo a shift in focus, a shift of a kind and degree so that it is no longer an exercise basing itself on the contemporarily overly-restrictive concept of religious experience but rather on the more unitive notion of religious response. We have suggested also, as a consequence, that the exercise needs to be seen, not as "religious education" but rather as "the guidance of religious response." These suggestions have presumed - a presumption we could only allude to in the confines of this paper

- an operative psychology and theology that have themselves undergone significant shifts in focus so that the human person and human experience are seen as imbued, by design, with an incarnational sacredness, and with an intent, as if by a spirit from within, to give recognition to a God of the whole of existence.

Under such a perception, the practice of "the guidance of religious response", while still descriptive of a structure and process within an educational setting, would increasingly and more accurately connote a dynamic identified with the whole span of a person's life. How could it be otherwise?

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