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A Framework for Religious Education

Abstract

The author constructs a general framework for religious education based on two hypotheses. The first is related to notions of the appropriate objectives for religious education in the public school setting, and second, these objectives have been linked to several theories of human development so that a trajectory or general framework emerges. As such, the conclusions drawn are based on theory rather than practise or classroom experience. The purpose is not to provide a methodological guide for the teaching of religious education, but rather to isolate and expand upon conceptions of the appropriate theoretical bases for the objectives and structure of religious education.

Of all aspects of human culture and history, perhaps none has exerted more influence than religion. Religion has to a large extent shaped man's world view, caused tension, and given inspiration. As philosopher Bernard Lonergan has written: "It is a region of human culture, an integral part of the social order, an explicitly acknowledged part in a tribal or national tradition" (1985, p. 120). In other words, religion has been and continues to be an important cultural phenomenon.

What role then should religion play in today's public education? Indeed, should it play any role at all? Is religion an aspect of human affairs that should remain the exclusive domain of the home and place of worship? These questions may simply, if not somewhat superficially, be dispensed with by making two basic acknowledgements. First, we may accept Lonergan's proposition that religion is an important cultural phenomenon, both past and present. Second, we may acknowledge the Deweyian notion that education is, in large part, a means whereby students are better able to

interact with their social environment and its attendant culture (Ozman & Craver, 1986). Once these two propositions are accepted, it can be concluded that the combination of religion and education is appropriate and necessary. "It can be said that since religion is an important cultural phenomenon it becomes a major concern of general education" (Engel, 1974).

If it is accepted that religion should in some way be incorporated into general education, then it becomes necessary to ask another series of equally important questions. What form should religious education take? What are the specific objectives? How may these objectives be structured?

The purpose of this essay is to answer these questions by outlining a specific philosophy of religious education. The first part of this essay will delineate two major objectives of religious education. The second part will be an attempt to outline a structural pattern for religious education that is in line with cognitive, spiritual, and psychosocial approaches to human development.

The Objectives of Religious Education

Before making any detailed discussion of the objectives of religious education, an important qualification must be made. There is a clear distinction between the teaching of religion and teaching about religion. The teaching of religion is aimed, among other things "at evoking commitment." Teaching about religion involves an inquiry in which understanding and awareness are sought (Phenix, 1974). Looked at another way, one may distinguish between education and worship. In the words of Philip Phenix, worship "is not an attempt to teach, but to proclaim and to celebrate" (p. 61).

It may be argued, with some justification, that the teaching of religion and understanding, with freeedom of choice, are not mutually exclusive; the two can go hand in hand. However, the circumstances in which this form of teaching is appropriate are quite limited. For example, a priest or nun may indeed be an excellent and appropriate teacher of religion for the homogeneous student body of a Catholic school. Such a teacher can facilitate understanding as well as belief.

The reality of the public school setting is, however, more often than not, quite different. Whether it is organized, as in Quebec, along confessional lines or not, the modern public school is usually representative of a cross-section of society at large. In other words, the student body is clearly heterogeneous in terms of its religious-cultural make-up. Within such an environment Phenix's distinction becomes relevant in that "to proclaim and to celebrate" a particular religious tradition becomes

inappropriate in the public school setting, because it becomes an attempt to persuade or evoke commitment. Such teaching can be offensive and unfair to students committed to other faiths. As well, religious education, if it is to achieve maximal educational goals, should not be a forum for competing traditions, each trying to attract adherents, but, rather, one where a variety of philosophies are explored in an equal and objective manner. Within such a structure, students ultimately have a true freedom of choice.

Thus within the multicultural environment of a public school setting, the implications of Phenix's distinction are clear. The attempt to evoke commitment or to proclaim religious traditions becomes a violation of a fundamental pedagogical principle of democratic education. It can be viewed as an attempt to impose certain values or beliefs. No matter how well intentioned, instruction of this sort within a multireligious public school setting amounts to indoctrination.

In contrast, an attempt to develop, as the primary aim, an understanding and awareness of religion serves a valuable purpose and remains within the bounds of a democratic education. This is not to say that a class in religious education must ignore the spiritual aspects of religion. To the contrary, religious education classes can be legitimately viewed as a vehicle whereby students may explore how religion might become part of their own spiritual existence. The religious education class can be a forum where students may ask ultimate questions regarding mystery and God. However, unlike the clergyman, "the teacher should serve as a referee of equality of representation, not as an advocate of any particular position" (Phenix, 1974, p. 61).

The objectives of religious education can be divided into two distinct and yet interrelated categories: cultural and spiritual. Both of these categories will be examined.

The cultural aspect

It might be said that religion is eighty percent culture and twenty percent faith. The influence of religion on culture cannot be denied, because it often makes up an integral part of a person's cultural identity. If one views a society in terms of its diversity, then religion often constitutes a major determinant of its multi-cultural dimension.

Viewed in the Canadian context, this aspect of cultural make-up is further amplified. The historical tension between French-Canadian Catholics and English-Canadian Protestants provides an obvious example of how religion contributes its influence to the cultural diversity of Canadian society. From a sociological perspective, however, Canada is much more

than the union of two distinct cultures divided by language and religion. Canada is a truly multi-religious society and each religious tradition plays a significant role in shaping the cultural identities of its adherents. E.T. Pryor, manager of the 1981 Census of Canada, describes the diversity and importance of religion in Canada in the following way:

> Canada is one of the few countries in the world collecting census data on religion. Identification with or adherence to specific religions has been viewed as an important determinant of Canadian values and cultural views. To portray the diversity of religions in Canada, for the 1981 census over 80 religious groups were coded and classified. Although the number of Canadians responding "no religion" amounted to 7.3% of the population, that also means that almost 93% did declare a religion. (Pryor, 1984, p. 6)

Aside from demonstrating the general importance of religion in shaping Canadian culture, Pryor's statement also raises several additional points regarding Canada's religious character. First, the vast majority of Canadians do have some type of religious identification, which further demonstrates the degree to which Canada maintains a religious character and second, that there is an increasing tendency towards a diversity of religious identification. There is a substantial and growing number of adherents of Eastern non-Judaeo-Christian religions now living in Canada, for example, adherents of Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist faiths (see Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1983).

The implications of such a diversity are profound. History has shown us that when diverse religious traditions come into contact, tension, alienation, and violence are often the result. In less extreme cases, religious minorities tend to be isolated and ghettoized within society. An environment characterized by ignorance, misunderstanding, and hostility often occurs.

If Canadian society is viewed within this context, it is important to consider what education can do to help alleviate or prevent these problems. If we view the educational system as an instrument of social change in which democracy and tolerance are promoted, it becomes appropriate that the study of religion be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Thus, we come to the first major objective of religious education. In light of Canada's increasingly multi-cultural fabric, students should acquire a basic knowledge and awareness of the various religious traditions. This would consist mainly of an objective examination of particular religious traditions from a cultural perspective. To quote Philip Phenix:

The most productive way of dealing with religion in most
school situations is to take the secular disciplines of history,
of literature, of art and architecture, of music and dance, of
geography, of sociology and anthropology, of psychology
and philosophy, using them to enter responsively and
evidentially into the study of the rites, institutions, beliefs,
and codes of religion. (1974, p. 68)

From Phenix's perspective, a religious education class is as much a
study of sociology as it is a study of religion. The aim is to promote
tolerance and understanding through the development of a knowledge and
awareness of diverse religious traditions. This orientation for religious
education has been accepted by the Protestant sector of the **Quebec Ministry
of Education.** In the words of the Comité Protestant, "Pupils should acquire
a general knowledge of other people's beliefs and cultures so that they can
communicate and live together (Gouvernement du Québec, 1984, p. 4). This
belief lessens the threat of prejudice and hostility that are often the result of
ignorance while harmony and understanding are promoted through
knowledge and awareness.

The study of religious symbols. In order to explore the content of
this type of religious study one may view each objective in terms of its
relation to a particular form of religious symbolizaiton. The terminology
used by Ira Progoff (1963) in his delineation of religious symbols clearly
illustrates the relationship between the two distinct objectives of religious
education and particular forms of religious symbolization. Thus, the
objectives of religious education can be divided into two distinct streams;
and each objective can be attached to a distinct form of religious
symbolization.

It can be said that most religious traditions are a form of collective
symbolization. The beliefs, orientation, worldview, and essence of religion
are given form and transmitted through symbolization. In other words,
"religions exist in symbolic forms" (Spinks, 1963, p. 68). If a religion is
viewed in terms of being a series of symbols, then a further distinction
between two basic types is possible.

Progoff formulated a classification of formative religious symbols
which are delineated either as representational (concrete social aspects) or
elemental (abstractly theoretical elements.) If the objectives of religious
education are viewed through this classification system then a clear
relationship between each obejective and Progoff's delineation of symbols
can be drawn. (As will be elaborated upon later, Progoff's classification
system is also useful for relating the objectives of religious education to
developmental theory.)

By returning to the cultural aspect of religious education, the relationship between Progoff's system of classifying symbols and the objectives of religious education can be illustrated. The cultural objective corresponds to representational symbols in that

> . . . representational symbols belong to the social sphere of life. They are formed by combinations of images that draw their meaning from the context of the cultural beliefs in which they arise. Thus the flag of a country is a representational symbol. The uniform of a soldier, or the vestments of a priest, the structure of a church, or temple, or mosque, are representational symbols. (Progoff, 1963, p. 94)

These examples of representational symbols correspond to the first objective of religious education because they tend to emphasize the social or cultural aspects of religion rather than the more spiritual aspects which relate to elemental symbols.

The festivals, dress, and art of the various religions are further examples of representational symbols. An examination of the basic rites, institutions, and beliefs of different religions through the use of representational symbols can contribute significantly to a student's knowledge, awareness, and, most importantly, tolerance of various religious traditions.

This type of study may be seen as having little to do with religion at all, and that the essence and meaning of religion have been ignored. It focusses strictly on "knowledge as the medium of understanding reality" and is divorced from "mystery as the ultimate reference of religion" (Miller, 1967, p. 118).

It is not suggested that religious education should ignore mystery; but, rather, that a representational study constitute the starting point of religious education for several reasons: (1) it helps meet the educational objective of increasing knowledge, awareness, and tolerance, (2) it lays the foundation for a deeper and more spiritual examination of religion, and (3) the representational phase of religious education is appropriate for younger students while the more spiritual/elemental phase is better reserved for older students.

The spiritual aspect

The second major objective of religious education deals with the more spiritual aspects of religion. Once students have become familiar with

the basic surface characteristics (representational symbols) of various religions, then they can begin to explore how their own questions concerning God and mystery are dealt with by different religions.

Again, if religion is viewed as a series of symbols, then it can be said that one of the objectives of religious education is to "provide visualizing symbols by which a person can grasp a working knowledge of our connection to the infinite" (1). In other words, the objective is to explore, in a comparative manner, how different religions conceive of humanity's connection to the infinite. In sum, the objective is to help students understand what the notion of God means and thus gain a comprehension of the essence of religion. In so doing, students, if they so choose, may explore how religious interpretations of God and mystery may be incorporated into their own lives.

Such a study would involve Progoff's (1963) elemental symbols of religion which function as the visualizing apparatus through which students can grasp "the kinship of man to the rest of creation" (p. 95). The elemental symbol differs from the representational symbol in that, according to Progoff, it "cannot be known in any fixed formulation or concept because its nature is not limited to finite forms which can be described in the intellectually structured laws of science" (p. 97). In other words, these symbols express man's connection to the infinite by means that are abstract and metaphorical. These symbols are a crucial object of study because they communicate the central or core beliefs of most religious traditions.

The elemental or spiritual aspects of religion can be explored through the critical examination of religious literature such as the Bible, Koran, and Torah. The myths and stories of these documents embody the essence of their respective traditions. As Tad Dunne (1985) has written, "without stories, we would have no way to symbolize, let alone to understand, what happens to us" (p. 152). Whether these stories were intended to be interpreted literally or symbolically by their authors is a matter of debate not relevant here. What is relevant is that much of the symbolism and imagery of these stories can be viewed as metaphors of God and mystery.

In the context of this article, the religious story or myth will be considered as fiction; however, it is fiction with a difference in that its key element is a symbolic truth. As Dunne (1985) writes,

> By truth we do not mean an accurate reporting of evidence, nor even a plausible explanation of the events that really happened in a specific time and place. Truth in fiction is about the actual possibilities of the human soul. (p. 159)

Many religious stories deal with questions of mystery, God, and love. Since these are not tangible, concrete entities, and are rather in the realm of sensation and consciousness, they can only be dealt with in a symbolic fashion. This perhaps more than anything is the essence and purpose of religious stories and myths.

The critical examination of such myths and stories can provide visualizing symbols of the human connection to the infinite. Students can begin to establish a personal point of contact and a philosophy in regard to spiritual questions when a particular story or myth is examined in terms of its symbolic or elemental meaning. In so doing, they are able to reflect on how each tradition approaches spiritual issues and can thus explore for themselves how they will deal with such questions. As well, "the basic principles of the nature of religion, of transcendence, of faith" become known to the student (Phenix, cited in Engel, 1974, p. 70).

It should be pointed out, that as with the representational symbolic aspects of religion, the same pedagogical principles of objectivity apply to the elemental symbolic aspects. In part, the objective is to explore how religion can be used to answer spiritual questions as opposed to teaching students how to use it. Just as the political science teacher explains how Marxist theory answers economic questions without encouraging his students to become Marxist, the religious education teacher facilitates an investigation of how religion answers spiritual questions without encouraging students to become religious. To violate this principle is to invade the domain of the church and to subvert the purpose of a democratic education.

Thus far, the two main objectives of religious education, representational and elemental symbols and their aims, have been outlined. The two objectives need not be completely divorced from each other. Attempts to understand the cultural, representational aspects of religion "without reference to God have always proved contradictory and reductionist" (Shea, 1978, p. 58-59). If these two objectives are viewed in light of a cognitive developmental approach to human development, then an appropriate pattern or framework for religious education emerges. Within such a framework the emphasis of each objective corresponds to a specific developmental stage. In the following section it is proposed that the structure of religious education should follow a developmental approach.

A Structure for Religious Education

The preceding section defined two distinct categories of religious education objectives based on the idea of religion consisting of a form of collective symbolization. The first dealt with concrete or representational symbols and the second dealt with abstract or elemental symbols.

The next step in constructing a framework for religious education is to give these objectives a structure or sequencing pattern. Developmental psychology can be used as a guide for setting the structure. In other words, developmental theory can be linked to the objectives in such a way that an appropriate structure emerges.

Developmental psychology has theorized that children pass through various phases or stages of development on the road to adulthood. In each stage the child thinks, sees, and perceives in a different way. The implications of this view on the content and methodology of instruction at various levels of the educational process are profound. In the words of Gage and Berliner (1975),

> The ways in which students develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally at different stages in their childhood and youth also have a bearing on how they should be educated and taught. (p. 13)

It is possible to conclude that educational objectives should correspond to how the child, at a particular stage, views phenomena and problems. The developmental theories of Jean Piaget, James Fowler, and Erik Erikson provide useful tools for sequencing the two objectives of religious education outlined above.

Piaget's cognitive development. Jean Piaget made a significant contribution to modern developmental psychology in establishing, among other things, the importance of cognitive processes in the psychological functioning of children (Mussen *et al.*, 1974). According to Piaget there are four major stages of intellectual development: (1) sensorimotor (0 to 18 months), (2) preoperational (18 months to age 7), (3) concrete operational (age 7 to 12), and (4) formal operational (age 12 onwards). During each stage the child employs a different system of thought when confronting various phenomena. For the purposes of applying Piaget's stage theory to the objectives of religious education, it is necessary to consider only the concrete operational and formal operational.

Most children enter the stage of concrete operational thought during the years of middle childhood. They can then begin to develop the ability to think logically when confronted with problems of a concrete nature. The word concrete implies the actual presence of objects or events (Glover *et al.*, 1983). According to Piaget, "the form of possibility characterizing concrete operations is nothing more than a limited extension of empirical reality" (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958, p. 250). Put another way, in the world of the concrete operational child, "there are few if any abstractions, but there are a multitude of distinctions that make all the difference" (Reimer *et al.*, 1983, p. 29).

In contrast to concrete operations, formal operational thinking represents a significant advance in cognitive ability, in that the child begins to reason on the "basis of hypotheses, or of proposition" (Mussen *et al.*, 1975, p. 189). The significant advances of this stage at this point can best be summed up in the following way:

> In the formal operational stage the student becomes capable of logical thinking with abstractions, that is, with the possible as well as the here and now. He can draw conclusions, offer interpretations, and develop hypotheses. His thought has become flexible and powerful. (p. 189)

The notion of abstractive thinking, or, as Walter Conn calls it, "imaginative speculation," enables the student to enter a whole new realm of thought (Conn, 1981, p. 80). The basic distinguishing factor between concrete and formal operational thought can be summarized by noting that concrete thought is attached to empirical reality while formal thought involves imaginative speculation.

Progoff and Piaget. If the two developmental stages of Piaget are viewed in light of Progoff's categorization of religious symbolization a clear link can be made between the two. Progoff's representational symbols, which correspond to the first objective, require only that the student be capable of concrete operational thought. The representational symbols are concretely empirical rather than abstract. Therefore, concrete operational children can fully comprehend their meaning. However, the elemental symbols, which correspond to the second objective require a much more sophisticated thought process. They deal with the most profound of abstractions and therefore require the imaginative speculation of Piaget's formal operational thought.

An important clarification regarding the educational implications of the linkage of Progoff and Piaget must be considered. Piaget's work emphasized the cognitive processes that a child employs when solving an intellectual problem, but it does not implicitly imply that a concrete operational child cannot be aware of an abstract concept. For example, the work of David Heller has clearly shown that children of the concrete operational stage do conceive of such religious abstractions as the concept of God (Heller, 1986).

However, when concrete operational children are asked to interpret a religious myth so that they can comprehend Dunne's "truth in fiction," it is asking too much. Concrete operational children are not cognitively prepared to attack an intellectual problem that requires an abstract pattern of thought. In other words, while concrete operational children may be aware of the

abstract concept of God, they cannot use imaginative speculation to distinguish between the literal-empirical reality of a myth and its abstract "truth." In sum, they have not yet acquired the formal operational tools of thought required to make such a distinction. Perhaps, in no other discipline, is the importance of making such a distinction as great as when one undertakes to study the meaning of religious literature.

Fowler's stages of faith. The problem of children's ability to interpret religious stories and myths has been the object of study by James Fowler, formerly a professor at the Harvard Divinity School, who has systematically worked out six stages of faith development in children and adults. It is not surprising that Fowler's stages of faith development are linked to Piaget's developmenal stages in that they "are dependent upon age and maturation" (Helminiak, 1987, p. 58). As well, Fowler bases his stage descriptions "on the how of faith rather than on the what or the content of faith" (Fowler, 1980, p. 143). In sum, like Piaget, Fowler puts the emphasis on process rather than content. While Fowler is more concerned with faith *per se,* his stages of development are of interest here because they tackle the problem of children's ability to understand religious stories.

Of Fowler's six stages of faith development, two are of particular interest because they roughly parallel Piaget's stages of concrete and formal operations. His second stage of faith is called mythic-literal faith. This stage corresponds to Piaget's stage of concrete operational thought in that it covers the years seven to twelve, and because it denotes the child's inability to think abstractly. Central to this stage of faith development is the idea that children are unable to critically formulate the meaning of religious stories and, instead interpret them in a one-dimensional, literal way. As Fowler (1980) writes:

> Stage Two does not step back from the flow of its stories to
> formulate reflective, conceptual meanings. For this stage the
> meaning is both carried and trapped in the narrative. (p. 45)

In contrast, Fowler's third stage, called synthetic-conventional faith occurs during the years of adolescence. This stage of faith is a reflection of Piaget's formal operational thought in that the adolescent is now able to interpret myths and stories in terms of critical reflection rather than through a mythic-literal acceptance of subject matter (Helminiak, 1987). According to Fowler (1980), "literalism breaks down" (p. 146).

If the linkage of Progoff, Piaget, and Fowler is viewed in terms of the objectives of religious education, it appears that students are cognitively prepared to tackle the representational-cultural objective when they have reached the concrete operational stage because the objective only requires a

literal interpretation and the use of representational symbols. Most importantly, students are not prepared to meet the elemental-spiritual objective until they have acquired formal operations; it requires an abstractive process of thought which concrete operational children do not possess.

Thus far, the contributions of developmental psychology have been applied to the objectives of religious education in terms of cognitive preparedness. The same type of application can be made in terms of a student's felt needs and psychosocial development.

Application of Erikson. Erik Erikson has descriptively analyzed eight stages of emotional, social, and personality development, in which each stage is characterized by a particular psychosocial crisis. As a person successfully resolves each crisis, he thereby gains the ability to cope with the problems presented at the next stage (Lingren & Suter, 1985). Like Piaget's theory of cognitive stage development, Erikson's theory of psycho-social development can be linked to the objectives of religious education.

Of Erikson's eight stages of development, stage five, called identity versus identity diffusion is of particular interest here. This stage, like Piaget's formal operations, usually occurs during the years of adolescence. During this stage:

> Young people engage in a search for who they are in terms of
> social, occupational, and sexual roles, as well as their
> ideological, religious, and/or ethnic identity. (Lingren &
> Suter, 1985, p. 82)

Simply stated, in Erikson's view adolescents are in search of a personal identity, or in other words are trying to determine who they are (Manaster, 1977).

While the identity-identity diffusion stage of development can be linked to both of the objectives of religious education, it is of particular interest in regard to the spiritual objective. Key to this stage of development, and parallel to the search for identity, is the search for "a basic philosophy, ideology or religion, which will provide the anchoring trust in life and society" (Maier, 1969, p. 63). The implication is that it is during this stage that students will seek answers to spiritual questions, and look for truth in a confusing world. In the words of Erikson (1982), the adolescent
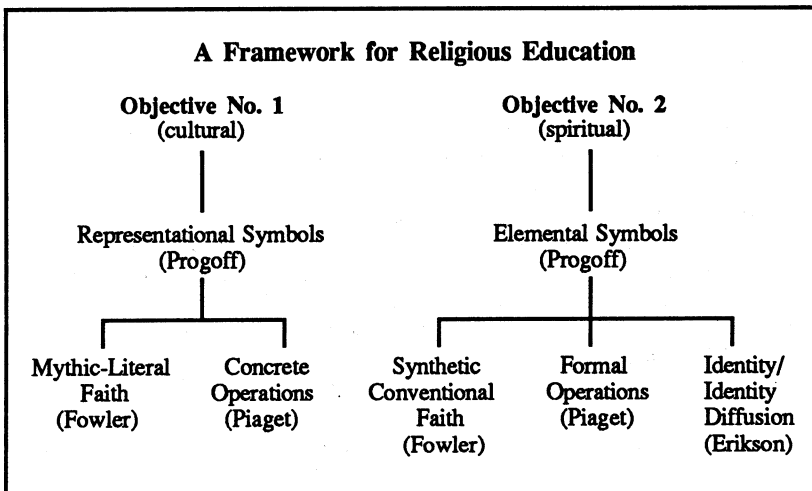
> . . . harbors some sensitive, if fleeting, sense of existence
> as well as a sometimes passionate interest in ideological
> values of all kinds – religious, political (and) intellectual. (p.
> 73)

The characteristics of the identity-identity diffusion stage link it primarily to the second objective of religious education in which abstract, philosophical questions are explored. It is also in line with Piaget's stages of development in that in terms of age, the spiritual objective takes on a particular importance during the adolescent years.

It can be argued that stage five adolescents are in reality in search of "ideological hammers" with which they will rule their worlds. They are indeed sensitive to ideological principles. If in a misguided fashion, the adolescent obsessively grabs hold of an ideological principle, to the exclusion of all others, then the result is indeed negative rather than positive. To produce religious fanatics is not the objective.

However, as Erikson's work shows, in their quest for identity, adolescents will become interested in philosophical views and ideologies. They are searching for ideas to have faith in. The second objective seeks to explore how philosophical views of God and mystery are incorporated into various religious traditions. By objectively exploring, in a comparative manner, how different religions answer philosophical questions, the religious educator does not implicitly encourage the obsessive adoption of an ideological principle. The teacher neither proclaims nor denies the validity of a particular viewpoint. However, students must be free to choose, if they so wish, to accept or reject certain viewpoints. To deny them this opportunity is to ignore their right to inquire into the meaning of life.

A graphic illustration of this framework is presented here.

A Framework for Religious Education

Objective No. 1 (cultural)		Objective No. 2 (spiritual)		
Representational Symbols (Progoff)		Elemental Symbols (Progoff)		
Mythic-Literal Faith (Fowler)	Concrete Operations (Piaget)	Synthetic Conventional Faith (Fowler)	Formal Operations (Piaget)	Identity/ Identity Diffusion (Erikson)

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to construct a philosophy of religious education, which begins with a commitment to objectivity and equality of representation. Two major objectives of religious education have been applied to theories of cognitive, faith, and social development. As a result a basic framework for religious education has emerged (see above).

The primary implication of such a framework is that religious education can be divided into two distinct parts or streams, with each corresponding to a particular form of religious symbolization which in turn corresponds to particular stages of human development.

The two objectives cannot be completely separated from each other. The implication of this framework is that the first objective should receive its primary emphasis during the elementary school years because it involves representational symbols, and it only requires a literal-concrete form of thought which is characteristic of elemenary school children. The second objective should receive its primary emphasis during the secondary years when students become capable of understanding the abstract, philosophical essence of religion and the function of elemental symbols. They then possess the intellectual capacity as well as the felt need to explore such questions.

NOTE

1.   This definition was arrived at through discussions with Professor Moira Carley of McGill University.

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