

Reflection Paper 1: Religious Education Interview

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I am here with Thomas Groome, “Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College, where he is also senior faculty at the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry” (Groome, About the Author). Before he starts his interview about what I have learned in my study of religious education, I would like to tell you, Dr. Groome, what caused me to ask you to conduct this interview. In your book, Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision, you wrote that education “is a human activity” and “as such does not exist, there is only what people do and want to do in its name, and that is the heart of the matter” (3). This thought captured my imagination as I hear you saying the central truth is that we are responsible for what we make of our activities and ourselves. Personifying an activity such as religious education would seem to assert *it*, not we, is responsible for what we do or intend in this activity. While educators must take responsibility for the education, it is also important to understand the purpose of religious education to which you referred in your mention of the “language debate” (3, 17). It is your treatment of the heart of the matter, the language debate and your classroom praxis approach to religious education with its associated steps have caused me to want to discuss this topic with you and believe this forum is best because it allows uninterrupted interchange. This interview is especially a great thrill for me because you, the teacher, will be asking me, the student, questions to show what I have learned through my studies in this, your area of expertise. Usually it is the student interviewing the expert. My excitement is heightened because I have used your approach in actual practice and it shed much light on what I believe to be important in education. Please start when you are ready.

**The “language debate” defines what it means to educate in faith or religion.**

**Please express your insights and thoughts about this subject.**

You mentioned several titles in your book to capture what it is we do in describing this activity, Dr. Groome, four of which I defined in my notes:

*Religious education* (is) the general investigation of the religious dimension of life and the common human quest for a transcendent ground of being (Groome 24); *religious instruction* (is) to teach about the general investigation of the religious dimension of life and the common human quest for a transcendent ground of being; *Christian education* (is) to lead one through oral instruction to comprehend truth as explained and expressed by the Christian tradition in Christian language or terms; and *catechetics* (is) to orally hand down information about a particular subject from generation to generation (Groome 3, Weiss 1).

I attempted to describe the activities using the meaning of the words as I understood them, quoting your definition of religious education because I could find no better way to state this. While it is important to be able to name our educational activities to better understand and carry them out, I do not see that this issue ought to be given primary importance. The sample of my definitions show subtle distinctions between terms and definitions, but this activity should not detract or limit the educating activity. Mary Boys adds relevant insight to the subject:

If, in our age, religious education is coming into its own as a distinct field, it is important not to lose sight that educating in ways of faith has always concerned humankind. If the twentieth century has accumulated an extensive body of literature about this “discipline in search of an identity,” it is essential not to lose a sense of indebtedness to the contribution of our ancestors in faith. Most of them were illiterate and certainly unschooled by the standards of our technological society...many possessed a sensitivity we might justly envy as a prerequisite for religious education (3).

I understand Mary Boys to be stating that when we look for an identity to express this educational activity, we should not only look to our technological society and its superior

education, penchant for definitions, preciseness and mass amount of material, but we ought to also look back to consider the wisdom which comes from the spiritual sensitivity of those who have gone before us, what you wrote Dewey called “the funded capital of civilization” (7). I believe this “funded capital” is what has been learned by those before us which we need to understand, access and use. Because of their view of the world with its assumptions and underlying philosophy, some of their insight and learning provide us knowledge we would not ordinarily have because our assumptions and underlying philosophy are different. That said, I believe the fundamental nature of any educational activity is to enable the student to think. This, in my opinion, is the source and summit of all education and is summed up in the popular saying that if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day, but if you teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime. I believe teaching people to think means for people to take the information they are presented or taught and evaluate it in order to come to an independent conclusion. I believe this is our birthright as sons and daughters of God. A failure to teach one to think shows either the teacher is purposely or unwittingly making the student dependent upon the teacher which does a great disservice to the student, especially in the education of religion. This problem shows why educators need to take responsibility for their teaching and points to a need for training of educators, be they volunteers or professional. In religion, a person cannot really call their faith their own unless they are able to think for themselves and enabled to come to a mature understanding of that faith. My educational activity in a church setting about church-related material can be called educating in faith, educating in religion, religious education or any other term which all have variant shades of meaning. These

variants show different approaches and emphases I have used in teaching which, by themselves, do not reflect the entire picture of what it means to educate in religion.

**You bring up an interesting point when you speak of the fundamental activity of education to be to teach the student how to think, Andy. Would you address the concept of thinking, what you have unearthed in your research and your thoughts on this topic?**

While my study was particularly on religious education and the philosophy of educating and not primarily the concept of thinking, I have come across some information and have formulated some thoughts on the subject. According to Timothy Lines, John Dewey believed thinking was a five-step process based on the scientific method which I would like outline. First, one must have an idea to investigate or a problem to be overcome. Second, one must develop a hypothesis that describes the idea or problem. Third, one must be able to reason deductively in order to make a decision on the best way to proceed based on the issue to be addressed. Fourth, one must test the “hypothesized relationships between the variables” empirically. Fifth, the results show either the hypothesis is or is not supported by the testing, after which more testing is done after the hypothesis is modified, if necessary (144-145). The scientific method gives us an organized way to break up into logical steps a process that can help one to consciously think something through. What I mean by thinking is that the person is able to formulate his or her own thoughts, not simply regurgitate what someone has told him or her. Dewey’s expression shows this by examining the steps to the method. When I am teaching a class, it is very important that the student do not come with the preconception that I provide information, they absorb it, and that is the entirety of the educational

process. Thinking as I am using it is the ability to assimilate and evaluate information and come to an independent conclusion. I believe methods of teaching are necessary that assist the student in learning this ability to think clearly.

**In your research or practical experience, have you found any method that teaches students to think as you describe above?**

Yes. I believe that your own shared praxis approach to religious education as outlined in your book, Christian Religious Education, is designed to cause people to own their faith, in other words to learn the content and enable them to think about and come to conclusions about that religious knowledge which produces a mature understanding. In accomplishing its goals, there are five movements or parts that need to be briefly outlined and discussed to show you what I have learned. The first is to name the present action (208-211). In this part, the teacher or facilitator states the topic and starts a discussion of the student's understanding of the topic at hand. Because this method requires individual expressions of understanding, in groups where participants do not know each other, some sort of ice breaker can help the people to become familiar with one another so that they might interact in the session. Interaction is a key to making this process work. The second is the participant's stories and visions (211-214). The purpose is to get the people to be aware of their own attitudes, reasons and intents through a personal evaluation by each person of how they have come to their present understanding of the subject. The third is the Christian community story and vision (214-217). In this part of the process, the teacher presents the relevant material in such a way that all the participants are enabled to interact with the substance of the presentation. The fourth you call the dialectical hermeneutic between the story and the participant's story (217-220). This

means we consider the impact the presented material has had on our understanding and how our understanding interacts with and questions the material presented. The fifth part of the process you called the dialectical hermeneutic between the vision and the participant's vision (220-223). In this last part, the people have a chance to decide how their relationship to this new information about their faith is going to affect their understanding and practice concerning the topic in the class and their overall faith as they integrate this knowledge and understanding. This approach to educating in faith is very similar to youth retreats I used to be involved in when I lived in Hawaii. When initially reading this information in your book, I recalled things we did in those retreats that enabled those young adults to be able to examine their own faith in any way they needed to and we would guide them so they would have a proper understanding about what the Church taught and what it meant for us as Catholics. I used this method in an RCIA Baptism class I taught in January 2003 and believe a brief examination of the class can add to my answer by concretizing it. By asking students to express their present understanding of Baptism, they are drawn into the class, transforming them from passive audience to active participants. A natural consequence of thinking about Baptism was that eyes lit up as they thought and verbalized what they wanted to know, including any questions they had in their hearts for some time, because this provided a forum for them to express and consider these questions, doubts and wonderings. I prefaced my presentation of Baptism by asking them to interject questions as they arose and ended by telling them this was my understanding of Church teaching as I read the Catechism and other documents, asked them what they thought of the presentation and if they had questions or thoughts positive or negative. Key in teaching a person to think is that their

thoughts not be censored when learning. I can imagine there are some in Church leadership who might find this way of thinking to be threatening, but unless the person is truly free to really think and explore the Church's ideas, they are limited in grasping their faith in a mature, well thought-out way. Doing this gave them a chance to evaluate what they heard and ask questions or receive clarifications which flows naturally into allowing participants to assign meaning to the fact they have or have not been baptized and to clarify their understanding of the subject. Finally, I called the students to determine their actions, thought patterns and/or attitudes about this sacrament from this experience. I believe this is a very important part in growing people of mature faith because it gives the student permission to experience and see any changes that have occurred because of this new understanding they have gained. I did caution them that the experience and learning do not stop when the class is over, but the learning had just begun as they use this to evaluate each aspect of the Catholic faith and come to a mature acceptance of that faith to which they felt called. I further noted that this examination of Baptism need not end tonight because there are some things that they will grasp later in different ways and that the human learning process cannot be limited to two or three hours, but sometimes spans a lifetime.

**Andy, I have great respect for the work of the Brazilian, Paulo Freire, and much modern thought in religious education have been affected by his work. Please relate to me your thoughts from your research on this man's work.**

Timothy Lines points out that Freire adheres to Marxist principles that have been shown to be an "abject failure" and that there is no real distinction between the oppressor and the oppressed (397). Freire seems to be willing to accept revolution so that the



oppressed can become the oppressor and vice versa without regard for the rights of all to live in peace (Lines 390-391). This shortcoming shows itself in your description of Freire's belief that education must be political in nature (190) which you also echo, "Educational activity with pilgrims in time is a political activity." When Freire equates educational and political activities and emphasizes "dichotomies of oppressed and oppressor," while at the same time claiming that "the correct method lies in dialogue," he is contradicting himself as Lines points out with his question: "How do dialogue and fighting go together" (396-397)? Further, Freire's claims that dialogue requires love of others, humility, mutual trust, hope, critical thinking and faith in man to make or remake the world are in direct conflict with the dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed he used and in his apparent willingness to support violent overthrow of present power structures because the first four values cannot co-exist with fighting (Groome 190, Lines 396). In your description of political activity as "any deliberate and structured intervention in people's lives which attempts to influence how they live their lives in society," the term *political activity* is stretched to fit the educational activity rather than discovering it in the educational activity (15). The closest definition of the word political I could find to your use is one in the dictionary.com website, "of or relating to your views about social relationships involving authority or power" (1). The definition only touches on one's views of authority or power in social relationships. The word 'influence' from your statement stretches authority or power further than the definition allows. For this reason, it seems to me the only possible purpose of this definition is in propagating an ideology, in Friere's case, his Marxist ideology. For these reasons, I reject both the assertion that every activity is political and that we must both use dialogue and fighting.

Freire does not seem to be aware of the concept of the common good, a concept which I believe to be far more useful than his dichotomy. While I maintain these objections to Freire's views, I believe he is correct in asserting dialogue and what is necessary for dialogue (Groome 190). I would also differ from Freire in that I believe both the function to integrate youth into the present generation and to allow youth enough leeway to transform the world through critical and creative thought are both essential for a healthy society so that the society can remake itself as it needs and grow in new ways to continue as the world around it changes (Groome 19).

**Now that we have examined several different concepts with your use of several different sources, always a healthy thing, please sum up what you believe to be most important things you learned in this study of the activity of educating in religion.**

The four things that come to mind in my studies of educating in religion are responsibility, purpose, method and complexity. Educators must take responsibility for their activities when teaching, facilitating and leading people in this important area of study. Religious faith is, in one sense, a very personal and important thing that one can possess. It is most clear this responsibility is taken seriously when educators explore and embrace the purpose of educating in religion, to enable people to think about a particular subject: to be able to understand the material, their positive and negative emotive response to the subject, the questions in their hearts and minds and to relate previous thoughts and learning so that they allow these earlier thoughts to mature. In order to enable a person to take hold and own their faith in this way, the educator must find, learn and employ a method for instruction that allows the people they are teaching to grow and

mature in their faith by allowing and inviting questions and self-discovery. Because we are such extremely complex beings, the person needs help to sort through the different levels on which they know since everyone has emotional, intellectual and spiritual responses to experience. Some experiences hurt and wound, some heal, some help the person to grow and mature. It is our job to create a space where people can come to find wholeness that matches the completeness and complexity of our faith. It is the role of the educator in faith and religion to do the job and do it well. There are many examples when people use religion for their own gain such as Jim Jones and many others who have led people down the path of death and destruction because they made them reliant upon the teacher instead of equipping them to be able to think for themselves so that they might grow and mature to live out their lives as God intended: whole people doing His will and being enabled to love brother and sister, even those who hate and persecute them (Mt. 5:44 RSV).

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