

Reflection Paper 2: Religious Education Interview

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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,” interviewed me about my study of educating in religion (Groome, *About the Author*).

The first topic we discussed was the “language debate.” (3). This debate, to accurately identify the very nature of education in religion, started with Protestant religious educators in the United States and seems to stem from a confrontation in religious education between liberal and neo-orthodox theology, the former group favoring *religious education*, the latter *Christian education* or *church education* (17). In my study, I defined several terms in my notes mentioned by Groome:

“*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).

These definitions show subtle distinctions between terms and definitions, yet I do not believe this should detract from or limit the educating that is done. Mary Boys adds:

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 Boys to be stating that when we look for an identity to express this educational activity, we should not only look to our modern, technological society, its superior education, penchant for definitions and preciseness and mass amount of material, but we ought to also look back to consider the wisdom and spiritual sensitivity of those who have gone before us, what 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 so as not to have to rediscover this knowledge again.

Let us consider some of the events and movements in history to give this examination of how to identify educating in faith or religion more depth. Revivalism has been part of the American landscape since around the early eighteenth century and was at the forefront of “periods of revitalization developing out of crises of beliefs and values,” such as the First Great Awakening. This movement focuses more on the emotive part of the human psyche, focusing on the “felt Christ,” summed up by Jonathan Edwards when he said, “Our people do not so much need to have their heads stored as to have their hearts touched.” This statement indicates less informational or theological content and more emotional attachment indicating an emphasis on conversion. When trying to move a person to an emotional response, one would focus on what historian Jay Dolan described as “an event gathering into one powerful showing all the warning of Divine justice,” an experience intended to “startle, to terrify, and to rouse the consciences of people” (Boys 13-14). Along with this revivalism came itinerant preachers, wandering around spreading that message. This education was artificial inasmuch as the emotive approach was used by these people to force a response and cannot rightly be called education, but rather religious manipulation. The liberal movement had been gaining

momentum since around 1730, during the First Great Awakening. Its tenants as expressed by Horace Bushnell speak of nurture as opposed to conversion, parental education instead of revivals, faith education becoming women's work and in liberal theology changing the doctrinal character of Christianity for the emotive and the normative criteria for theological thought replacing the ancient texts with philosophy, science and historical movements. The term religious education in its classical expression starts in the liberal movement. This movement is an obvious corrective for the revivalist approach where one is *scared into heaven* (Boys 40-46). This content describes an accurate description of educating in religion and identifies from where it gets its start. Evangelicalism has conversion as its center value with a sense of urgency pushing its adherents onward as Christian soldiers. This movement vaulted the Sunday school to the forefront with the library becoming the mark of a bona fide school. Sunday school implies educating of some sort and with the advent of the American Sunday School Union and other benevolent societies, all use education to prepare the young for conversion and become, by default, literacy factories (Boys 27-31). It is interesting to note that, while the liberal movement saw religious education as a thing to nurture instead of something to convert to, Evangelicalism uses religious education as a precursor to and preparer of conversion. Progressivism's most visible adherent is John Dewey. Its contributions to religious education are the interrelatedness of knowing and doing, a child-centered curriculum and the formation of the whole-person approach (Boys 46-49). These tenants sound like the very modern ideas, in my experience, of the holistic approach that considers more than just one part of the person such as the intellect or the consistency of actions and beliefs. Education now requires a more well-rounded

approach to educating a person than to scare them into believing as in revivalism or to simply lead them in the direction they will naturally go as in liberalism. Progressivism is combined with liberal theology in George Albert Coe. Noticing a conflict between traditional religion and evolutionary theory, Coe turns from the dogmatic method to the scientific method, views education as redemptive, sees evangelism as “un-educational,” intending to make conversion unnecessary and retranslates “kingdom of God” as “democracy of God.” He defines religious education as the “systematic, critical examination and reconstruction of relations between persons,” adding that this is “guided by Jesus’ assumption that persons are of infinite worth, and by the hypothesis of the existence of God, the great Valuer of Persons” (Boys 49-53). This puts the human person in the center, the “democracy of God” showing people to be in charge and rule by consensus, so that everything is decided upon a vote. In the end, I find Groome’s argument most persuasive and logical, that catechesis (retelling the Christian story) has a more consistent historical meaning and is best equipped to describe what we do in educating in this field to solve this dilemma (27).

I believe the fundamental nature education is to enable the student to evaluate the subject and form an opinion or to think. I believe this is the main point 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 equates to teaching people to fish. Educators who fail to teach students to think show they are making the student dependent upon the teacher or any other person. In religion, a person cannot really call their faith their own unless they are able come to a mature understanding of that faith which comes from the ability to think. 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. According to Timothy Lines, John Dewey (lived 1859 – 1952) believed thinking was a five-step process based on the scientific method which I outline here. 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 think through a subject. Dewey’s expression shows my definition in reviewing the steps to the method. When I am teaching a class, it is very important that the student not come with the preconception that I provide information and they absorb it as the entirety of the educational process. **Thinking** is the ability to assimilate and evaluate information and come to an independent conclusion. Independent is not necessarily different from others, but as come to from their own intellectual work. I believe methods of teaching are necessary that assist the student in learning this ability to think clearly.

I believe that Groome’s *shared praxis* approach to religious education outlined in his book is designed to cause people to learn the content, explore the ideas and enable them to come to conclusions, producing mature understanding. I outline the five parts of his method here. The first is to name the present action (208-211). The teacher states the topic and starts a discussion of the student’s understanding of the topic at hand. In

groups where students do not know each other, an ice breaker helps people become familiar with one another in order to participate. 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 of how they came to their present understanding of the subject. The third is the Christian community story and vision (214-217). 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 is the dialectical hermeneutic between the story and the participant's story (217-220). This means the impact the presented material had on our understanding and how our understanding interacts with and questions the material presented is considered and discussed. The fifth part of the process is called the dialectical hermeneutic between the vision and the participant's vision (220-223). In this last part everyone has 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 it. This approach to educating in faith is similar to youth retreats I used to be involved in. These retreats enabled those young adults to be able to examine their own faith in any way they needed to with us guiding them so they would have a proper understanding about what the Church taught and what it meant for us as followers of Jesus and Catholics. I used this method in an RCIA class about Baptism I taught in January 2003 and believe a brief examination of the class can add to my answer by showing it in action.

As the students expressed their present understanding of Baptism, they were drawn into the class, transforming them from a passive audience to active participants. A

natural consequence of thinking about Baptism was that eyes lit up as they thought about 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 this part by explaining that this was my understanding of Catholic 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. It is important in teaching a person to think 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. This approach 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 attitudes about this sacrament from this experience. I believe this is a very important part in allowing the faith of people to mature 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 you 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.

The work of the Brazilian, Paulo Freire, has been very influential in the thought of modern religious education, and for whose thought Groome has a special affinity.

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 switch places with the oppressor without regard for the rights of all to live in peace (Lines 390-391). This shortcoming shows itself in Groome’s description of Freire’s belief that education must be political in nature, which he also echoes, “Educational activity with pilgrims in time is a political activity” (Groome 15, Lines 395). 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)? 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, at least, cannot co-exist with fighting (Groome 190, Lines 396). In Groome’s 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 his 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 “the correct method lies in dialogue” and overall, what is necessary for dialogue as referenced above (Groome 190). I would also differ from Freire’s either/or scenario concerning functions of education in that I believe both 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 to adapt as the world around it changes (Groome 19).

There are four things at the forefront in my studies of educating in religion: 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 one of the most personal and important things any person 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, they must relate their positive and

negative emotive responses to the subject, the questions in their hearts and minds and 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, self-discovery and learning. 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, wound, heal and 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).

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