Roots & Wings

The Periodical of the Professional Society of Religious Educators

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first edition of *Roots & Wings* for 2019. This publication, sent electronically free of charge to members of the Professional Society, will appear quarterly. It will contain regular features as indicated in the Contents table alongside.

Members are encouraged to send material for future editions. What might you send? Here are some examples:

- Lesson ideas or plans
- Reviews of useful materials such as books or websites
- News from your school's RE Department
- Short articles of interest to religious educators
- Adverts for RE posts in your school

REMINDER

It is not necessary for CPTD purposes to submit your responses to the chosen article to CIE since this exercise falls under the category of teacher initiated activities also called Type 1 activities: Activities initiated personally by an educator to address his/her identified needs. For example, enrolling for an ACE programme, writing an article for an educational publication, attending a workshop, material development, participating in professional learning communities, engaging in action research in your own classroom.

REFLECTION

Things beyond our Imagination

(Ron Rolheiser)

Recently, at an academic dinner, I was sitting across the table from a nuclear scientist. At one point, I asked him this question: Do you believe that there's human life on other planets? His answer surprised me: "As a scientist, no, I don't believe there's human life on another planet. Scientifically, the odds are strongly against it. But, as a Christian, I believe there's human life on other planets. Why? My logic is this: W*hy would God chose to have only one child?"*

Why would God choose to have only one child? Good logic. Why indeed would an infinite God, capable of creating and loving beyond all imagination, want to do this only once? Why would an infinite God, at a certain point, say: "That's enough. That's my limit. These are all the people I can handle and love! Anything beyond this is too much for me! Now is the time to stop creating and enjoy what I've done."

Put this way, my scientist friend's hunch makes a lot of sense. Given that God is infinite, why would God ever stop doing what God is doing? Why would God favor just us, who have been already been given life, and not give that same gift endlessly to others? By what logic, other than the limits of our own mind, might we posit an end to creation?

We struggle with this because what God has already created, both in terms of the immensity of the universe and the number of people who have been born in history, is already too much for our imagination to grasp. There are billions and billions of planets, with trillions of processes happening on each of these every second. Just on our planet, earth, there are now more than seven billion people living, millions more have lived before us, and many more are being born every second. And inside of each of these persons there is a unique heart and mind caught-up in an infinite and complex array of joys, heartaches, and moral choices. Moreover, all of these trillions of human and cosmic processes have been going on for millions and billions of years. How can we imagine a heart and a mind somewhere that knows and loves and cares intimately about every individual person, every individual joy, every individual heartache, every individual moral choice, and every individual planet, star, and grain of sand, as if it were an only child?

The answer is clear: It cannot be imagined! To try to imagine this is to end up either in atheism or nursing a false concept of God. Any God worth believing in has to be able to know and love beyond human imagination, otherwise the immensity of our universe and the uniqueness of our lives are not being held inside the loving care of anyone's hand and heart.

But how can God know, love, and care for all of this immensity and complexity? Moreover, how will all these billions and billions of people go to heaven, so that all of us end up in one body of love within which we will be in intimate community with each other? That's beyond all imagination, at least in terms of human capacity, but my hunch is that heaven cannot be imagined not because it is too complex but because it is too simple, namely, simple in the way Scholastic philosophy affirms that God is simple: God so embodies and encompasses all complexity so as to constitute a reality too simple to be imagined.

It seems too that the origins of our universe are also too simple to be imagined: Our universe, in so far as we know it, had a beginning and scientists believe (The Big Bang Theory) that everything originated from a single cell of energy too tiny to measure or imagine. This single cell exploded with a force and an energy that is still going on today, still expanding outward and creating billions and billions of planets in its wake. And scientists believe that all of this will come back together again, involute, sometime in

a future which will take billions of more years to unfold.

So here's my hunch: Maybe the billions and billions of people, living and dead and still to be born, in both their origins and in their eventual destiny, parallel what has happened and is happening in the origin, expansion, and eventual involution of our universe, that is, just as God is creating billions and billions of planets, God is creating billions and billions of people. And, just as our physical universe will one day come back together again into a single unity, so too will all people come together again in a single community within which God's intimate love for each of us will bring us together and hold us together in a unity too simple to be imagined, except that now that union with God and each other will not be unconscious but will be known and felt in a very heightened, self-conscious gratitude and ecstasy.

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REFLECTION

"Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" Pre-Synodal Meeting Final Document (Introduction) (Rome, 19-24 March 2018)

The young person of today is met with a host of external and internal challenges and opportunities, many of which are specific to their individual contexts and some of which are shared across continents. In light of this, it is necessary for the Church to examine the way in which it thinks about and engages with young people in order to be an effective, relevant and life-giving guide throughout their lives.

This document is a synthesized platform to express some of our thoughts and experiences. It is important to note that these are the reflections of young people of the 21st century from various religious and cultural backgrounds. With this in mind, the Church should view these reflections not as an empirical analysis of any other time in the past, but rather as an expression of where we are now, where we are headed and as an indicator of what she needs to do moving forward.

It is important at the outset to clarify the parameters of this document. It is neither to compose a theological treatise, nor is it to establish new Church teaching. Rather, it is a statement reflecting the specific realities, personalities, beliefs and experiences of the young people of the world. This document is destined for the Synodal Fathers. This is to give the Bishops a compass, pointing towards a clearer understanding of young people: a navigational aid for the upcoming Bishops' Synod on "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment" in October 2018. It is important that these experiences be viewed and understood according to the various contexts in which young people are situated.

These reflections were borne out of the meeting of more than 300 young representatives from around the world, convened in Rome March 19-24, 2018 at the inaugural Pre-Synodal Meeting of Young People and the participation of 15,000 young people engaged online through the Facebook groups.

The document is understood as a summary of all of our participants' input based on the work of 20 language groups and 6 from social media. This will be one source, among others, that will contribute to the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod of Bishops 2018. It is our hope that the

Church and other institutions can learn from the process of this Pre-Synodal Meeting and listen to the voices of young people.

Understanding this, we can therefore move forward to explore with openness and faith where the young person is situated today, where the young person sees his or herself in relation to others, and how we as the Church can best accompany young people towards a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

(To read the whole document or chosen excerpts, go to http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html . The contents are listed below.)

Part One: The Challenges and Opportunities of Young People in the World Today

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TALKING ABOUT RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (CPTD)

Current Thinking about Religious Education in Catholic Schools (Part 1)

(Paul Faller – Catholic Institute of Education)

CONTEXT

While South Africa would not be described as a first-world country, it nevertheless becomes increasingly a part of the global village and therefore has not escaped the various influences of globalisation, secularisation and cultural postmodernity – of course to a lesser degree in rural than in urban areas. What, then, are the characteristics of the current milieu – secularisation in particular – that have an impact on Religious Education?

The process of secularisation turns our attention away from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time. Lieven Boeve, a Dutch theologian, points to three characteristics of secularisation – individualisation, detraditionalisation and pluralisation. In the first place, "individuals are seen as creating their own identities, rather than having their identity assigned to them by the society or culture in which they live… Elements of identity such as gender, religion, marriage or ethnicity are seen as being shaped by personal choice, rather than by culture, religion or biology" (Sharkey, 2017, p. 61).

In a detraditionalised society, cultural and religious traditions are not automatically passed down from one generation to the next. This is partly due to a critical stance that shifts the recognition of authority from the office to the individual person holding that office. So a doctrine or a practice of the Church will not be entertained because the Church proclaims it, but because it is personally meaningful. Crawford and Rossiter (2006) describe "a radical shift towards a more hermeneutic consciousness of

reality" (p. 387). Religious conceptions of reality, they say, are seen as interpretations that always fall short of the reality they are trying to capture. They do not therefore have the same compelling power to convince as before.

Another factor influencing this shift is the pluralisation of society where "a variety of religious and ideological traditions sit visibly and legitimately in the public space so that individuals are forced to confront the reality that one's own tradition is but one among many alternatives" (Sharkey, 2017, p. 62). The choice before young people today is not only from among religious traditions. McGrath (2017, p. 186) draws attention to the fact that society is increasingly less religious, becoming indifferent or even hostile towards it so that being religious is one choice among many.

The political consequences of secularisation are familiar to all of us. There is typically a separation of church and state. The ruler's religion no longer dictates the religion of the ruled as it was in medieval Europe. Thus, South Africa is no longer officially described as a Christian state as it was in the past. This separation leads to the privatisation of religion as faith recedes from the centre of culture. Hence, here in South Africa, Religious Education is no longer part of the public school curriculum.

These present realities may seem negative at first sight, and set to undermine religion. Looking closer, we see that secularisation and its consequences free religious institutions from state control and allow them to become critical, prophetic voices in society. An atmosphere of freedom of religion also allows different religions to come together as equals to collaborate on global issues.

At a recent symposium 'Religious Education, Secularisation and Australian Catholic Schools' (July 2017), keynote speaker, Henri-Jerome Gagey of the Catholic Institute of Paris spoke of secularisation as "the dawn of a new civilisation, comparable to the fall of the Roman Empire… or the invention of the printing press" in Renaissance times. Gagey and other speakers encouraged their hearers not to bury their heads in the sand, or to give in to what seemed inevitable, but to respond actively to the reality while being faithful to the tradition.

However there are many religious educators who resist the change and their teaching becomes reactionary and fundamentally inclined as they struggle to be simultaneously faithful to their school's religious character while educating young people to make sense of religion in today's world. But this is a challenge that Religious Education must face if it is to remain relevant. Edward Schillebeeckx (1969, p. 53), a Belgian theologian whose contributions to the Second Vatican Council made him known throughout the world, describes the challenge quite clearly.

> *It is clear that Christian revelation in its traditional form has ceased to provide any valid answer to the questions about God asked by the majority of people today, nor would it appear to be making any contribution to modern man's real understanding of himself in this world and in human history... The situation requires us to speak of God in a way quite different from the way in which we have spoken of him in the past. If we fail to do this, we ourselves shall perhaps still be able to experience God in outmoded forms, but clearly our own witness of and discussion of God will be met by most people with headshaking disbelief as mumbo-jumbo. It is partly because we are blind to the "signs of the times" that God's word, in all that we say of him, is returning to him void – just the opposite of what the Old Testament prophet assured us would happen.*

Schillebeeckx (1969, p. 172-3) describes the radical change of attitude in society as one that no longer looks primarily to the past (and thus to tradition), but to the future building up of the world. This is a consequence of the ever increasing importance in modern life of the natural sciences, technology, and the behavioural sciences. This change now requires religion to adopt a new image of God who need no longer serve as the substitute for the powers we lack, but as 'the God of the future of man' who gives to us in Christ the possibility of making the future. The future for religion, and for Religious Education by implication, lies no longer in a 'monologue system' but in a dialogue, because "we have become aware that no one has a monopoly of the truth and the truth transcends all our thoughts and yet lives among us. It is experienced not in the soloist's song, but in the polyphonic chorus of all mankind" (1969, p. 66). This insight points to a new paradigm for Religious Education which will be described in more detail later.

Given contemporary culture and the place of religion within it, what is the experience of young people today? How do they relate to the world of religion, and how can Religious Education be a source of life for them in an often difficult world? Two characteristics of the classroom today will play a major part in shaping the future of Religious Education – the spirituality of contemporary youth shaped by secularisation, and the multireligious student body resulting from the process of globalisation. We discuss each in turn.

The Spirituality of Youth

More and more people today describe themselves as spiritual but not religious and we need to appreciate the implications of this distinction. Graham Rossiter (2013, p. 10) explains.

> *The spiritual is the natural dimension to life that includes thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose to life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic.*

On the other hand

> *Being religious means being spiritual in a particular way as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religious group. It usually includes a sense of personal relationship with God, belief in an afterlife and identification with, and participation in a local religious community. The religious is usually informed by a theology; and it participates in a ritual life and prayer, as well as relating to religious symbols, art and music.*

Why is it that there is among youth an increasing interest and involvement in the spiritual dimension of life while at the same time a withdrawal from practice associated with a traditional religious community? For better or for worse, the process of secularisation has led contemporary society to this position. Because culture can be "an unrecognized presence, 'a highly selective screen' between us and our world which decides 'what we pay attention to and what we ignore'" (Gallagher, 1997, p. 7), it is no surprise that younger generations will assume – in most instances uncritically – the prevailing cultural worldview.

Graham Rossiter (2012, p. 9) provides a summary of the chief characteristics of youth spirituality today. This is, of course, not true for all young people: some tend "to withdraw into highly structured fortresses of resistance to the chaos that they perceive" (Gallagher, 1997, p. 30). A common form of contemporary spirituality Rossiter says is

- *individualistic* (rather than communal),
- *eclectic* in the way it pieces together various elements from different sources (often little may be drawn from the religious tradition),
- *subjective* in that it is private and personal without much communal identification,
- *secular* in that it has little or no overlay of religious cultural meanings, and
- *constructed* personally or *selected* from a range of readily available options.

Furthermore, and perhaps most tellingly, authority resides no longer in the institution. The individual has become his/her own ultimate *touchstone* for authenticity in beliefs and values. Religious teachings that do not seem to be relevant, having no perceived connection with life, may simply be ignored, or discarded as an unnecessary burden (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 406-407).

It is not that young people have summarily dismiss religion. They may have no first-hand experience upon which to make a judgement, or they may start from the position that religion may well be of interest and even important for them. Whatever the case, Crawford and Rossiter (2006) argue that "they need to be educated in relation to issues in meaning, identity and spirituality that bring them to the *beginning point* of seeing that religion does have something valuable to contribute, and that it warrants study… getting to the spiritual starting point is the task of the compulsory school religion curriculum" (p. 386).

The Multireligious Classroom and the Common Good

The current vision of the Catholic Church in South Africa, an "Evangelising Community serving God, Humanity and all Creation," suggests an inclusive understanding of the Church's mission. The Church is a serving

community, dedicated to furthering the common good.

From official statements of the Catholic Church concerning the common good we can isolate the following principles (Faller, 2016, p. 8):

- All people have equal dignity;
- All belong to the one human family;
- Conditions must be created to enable all to reach their fulfilment;
- Persons have priority over structures created to serve their needs;
- The distinctive characteristics of every person and group needs to be recognised;
- Every person has a right to share in the common good;
- Every expression of social life has the common good as the authentic reason for its existence.

There should be little argument as to whether these principles apply to the Catholic school which is "a school for all" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 7, 15), welcoming all regardless of their religious identity. We therefore need to take into account, when fashioning our Religious Education curriculum as a service for all, a number of different realities (Faller & McCormick, 2013, p. 17). Among our learners are possibly

- those who come from religiously supportive homes;
- those for whom the school may be the first and only experience of a faith community;
- those who come from different Christian traditions;
- those who come from other faith backgrounds;
- those who are committed to their tradition;
- those who are not committed to a particular tradition and who may even be dismissive or hostile towards religion.

Denis McLaughlin (2000, p. 23) argues that the Catholic school's primary purpose is the promotion of the Kingdom of God, but given the reality in South Africa of an increasingly multireligious teacher and student population, the practical meaning of evangelisation takes on a different emphasis. McLaughlin (2000) argues that "if kingdom values are deliberately honoured and experienced in the Catholic school, then the Catholic school is fulfilling its primary mandate, even if there appears to be little evidence among students of growth of an incipient personal relationship with Christ, let alone commitment to the Catholic Church" (p. 23-24).

In the practice of Religious Education this might mean that the promotion of the Kingdom in the Catholic school may not always overtly honour the externals of the Catholic tradition (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 24). Instead the primary focus will be on authentic human growth through the establishment of a community wherein the kingdom values that Jesus lived are upheld and practised. "What makes the Catholic school distinctive," according to Vatican II, " is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love" (Second Vatican Council, 1965, *Gravissimum educationis*, para. 8). According to Pope John Paul II, we need "to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals … are formed" (Pope John Paul II, 2000, para. 43). Such a spirituality, he says, "inspires in us a commitment to practical and concrete love for every human being" (para. 49).

What will this mean in practice? We now turn to reflect on a suitable approach to Religious Education in this context.

APPROACH

When entering the Religious Education classroom it is unwise for the teacher to make any assumptions about the faith of their students. Even though practically every South African learner will have at least a nominal religious identity – mainly, though not all, Christian – many live in that milieu of the secular world that has parted ways with formal religion. In this situation, what should be the starting point for Religious Education?

Crawford and Rossiter's getting to the 'beginning point' (2006, p. 386) is described in different terms by Michael Paul Gallagher (2001) who says that religion "is in danger of thinking

that its historically produced ways of acting and thinking are somehow God-given and permanent. This is to fall into what St Paul would call 'law' - in the sense of human traditions that can block the freshness of God's gift and its power to transform us. If that happens, religion becomes humanly hollow in its communications and spiritually stagnant in its self-security. Its inherited languages can become a shield against God" (p. 122-3). He quotes a remark of Sebastian Moore that the 'ineffectiveness of organized religion today is due to its failure to speak to the pre-religious God awareness', and he explains that "'pre-religious' points to the whole area of openness or readiness for the word of revelation" (p. 120) Efforts at evangelisation must 'dive deeper' to nourish the human grounds of faith. "Where the surrounding culture causes disposition to stay dull, or imagination to suffer malnutrition," says Gallagher, "it is small wonder that the human grounds of faith remain weak. Today's typical crisis of faith involves a culturally induced desolation on the pre-religious level" (p. 120)

Gallagher (2001, p. 121-2) pleads for a highlighting of the pre-religious adventure of faith, and he offers a litany of reasons) in justification of his plea.

- Because it has been neglected.
- Because without attention to this more spiritual area of our searching and finding, the forms of religious faith lack roots and credibility within today's culture.
- Because this layer of wonder is universal in people and often they have no way to recognise it.
- Because one of the surprises of our post-modern moment of culture is a spiritual exploration in this pre-religious area of faith-hungering.
- Because it seems a waste to train people in the externals of religion without initiating them into the wavelength of mystery at the core of religious experience.
- Because the Spirit is at work in all people on this wordless level of an orientation to love and to reverence – prior to any encounter with the crowning outer Word of Christ.

Daniel O'Leary addresses the question of 'beginning point' from a different perspective. While Gallagher's approach is "to make Christian faith more real through exploring our ordinary but deep human experience" (2001, p. 1), O'Leary's focus is on setting free the 'sacramental imagination…the eye of the Christian heart' (2008, p. 9) so that we can give our students 'something beautiful to fall in love with'.

O'Leary encourages us to set free the Catholic imagination and sacramental vision that has always characterised the tradition. "Without catching the vision," he says, "the heart does not know where to go; but without the fire of the imagination it doesn't want to go anywhere, least of all to church!" He makes a plea to teachers (and catechists) "to work with a passion for acquiring that central vision" because only when "filled with that vision" can we all "be part of a new and blessed renaissance in our church and world" (2008, p. 13).

What precisely is this vision? It is simply this – in the words of Simone Weil: "With imagination you don't have to travel far to find God – only notice things. The finite and the infinite live in the same place. It is here alone, at this precarious and vital point, that the holy secret is laid bare (O'Leary, 2008, p. 18).

The task of the educator then is, "beyond the giving of new information to students, to bring them to the edge of their own divine possibilities for recognizing the divine everywhere." And just as Gallagher would say, "story, poetry and all the creative arts become a necessary part of this adventure. A basic aim is to provide space for graced vision to happen" (O'Leary, 2008, p.28).

In her review of the literature concerning the spiritual development in the early years, Grajczonek (2015) makes the same point about beginnings. She argues that "the starting point should be with children's innate spirituality or… their human spirituality, rather than with their religiosity. In other words, if teachers nurtured those features or characteristics common to both spirituality and religiosity, such as relationship, imagination, wonder and awe, and so on, they would, in the first instance, be nurturing children's spiritual development, which could then lead to their religious development" (p. 32). She then lists the "essential common areas of focus for nurturing both children's spiritual and religious development." These include "approaches, strategies and activities that pay attention to and activate: their imagination and

creativity; their senses of wonder and awe, of mystery, of identity and belonging, of connectedness to themselves, others, nature and for some to God or an Ultimate, of security and serenity; their participation in, and contribution to, community and to the wellbeing of family, friends and community members" (2015, p. 33).

If the approach to be taken is bringing students to the 'beginning point', what then are appropriate aims for the subject? What are the endpoints that Religious Education should envisage and plan for?

(Part 2 will appear in the next edition of *Roots & Wings* together with a list of references.)

CURRICULUM FOCUS

It is useful to be reminder from time to time that a healthy and relevant Religious Education curriculum needs to be a multi-process affair. Currently, in South African Catholics schools, the recommended curricula – Lifebound for primary, and CORD for secondary schools – contain 15 integrated areas or processes. In this regular feature, we'll take a look at an aspect of a particular process – in this case Theology.

What is theology? The word 'theology' comes from the two Greek words, *Theos* for God, and *logos* for word. In the light of this, we may describe theology simply as a way of talking about God with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of what we believe.

Theology is best understood as a verb. It is something to be done and its outcome is always subject to revision as our understanding grows. There are ways of doing theology some more helpful than others. Here we'd like to introduce you to the distinction that authors Stone and Duke (*How to think theologically*, 2013) make between embedded and deliberative theology. Becoming aware of this distinction will have a positive impact on our personal way of thinking and affect the way we teach theology.

Embedded Theology

Whenever we confront tough questions that raise ethical/moral, spiritual, cultural, religious, gender, environmental, economic, or socio-political issues, we find ourselves, whether we like it or not, 'doing theology'. The question is, do we resort to inherited responses without having to think too hard about them (e.g. "Abortion is murder", "Only born-again Christians will be saved")? Or do we make the effort to reflect critically and in an informed way on the issues being raised, attending to a range of resources and views so that we can respond in a considered – and theologically wise – way?

The truth is, most people – whether or not they think of themselves as 'religious' – tend to respond to such issues in a fairly uncritical, unreflective way, resorting to views they have inherited from others (their parents, friends, the news media, 'experts', etc.) rather than giving serious personal thought to the matter. It's natural that we do so. After all, if we had to think deeply through every issue that came our way, we'd do little else – or we'd be paralysed by indecision!

Stone & Duke call this 'embedded theology'. It is the theology that we have picked up from all around us – from parents, preachers, church leaders, books, magazines, the hymns we sing, and so on – and that we find no reason to question. "It is the implicit theology that Christians live out in their daily lives". We need

it: it guides us through life and, most of the time, it does a good job. It's a kind of 'common sense' theology.

However, things happen that require us to step back from our 'embedded theology' and ask whether it is adequate. A child is murdered, or a plane full of people is shot out of the sky, or an earthquake kills thousands, or I am unfairly dismissed from my job, and I am confronted by fundamental questions about God and life. Very often people ask, "Why does God allow this?" That question springs straight from the depths of an 'embedded theology' – in this case, the belief that God directly controls everything. And that raises the difficult question: if God really were all-powerful and all-loving, God would not allow these things to happen. That they *do* happen therefore suggests that God is either all-powerful but uncaring, or all-loving but powerless. And, without a way to deal with that dilemma, it's all too easy to resort to fatalism, doubt, or bitterness.

For disciples of Jesus, resorting to 'embedded theology' or 'conventional wisdom' isn't good enough, especially when we are faced with the big issues of the day. We need to be able to *think theologically*, to *do theology*, to engage in *theological reflection*.

Deliberative Theology

Let's look at what we need to do in order to go beyond 'embedded theology' and to be reflective theologians.

Stone and Duke define 'deliberative theology' as what we do when we carefully reflect on our embedded theological convictions. We step back from our assumptions; we question what we have taken for granted, examining a range of alternative views or theories or understandings, in order to arrive at "an understanding of the issue that seems capable – at least for the present – of withstanding any further appeal".

That doesn't necessarily mean that we have found a once-and-for-all answer: that would be to resort to a dogmatic fundamentalism that says, "I know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – and only I am right." There's been too much of that in the history of the Church – and we still see too much of it today.

No: theological reflection is an on-going task. God doesn't change, and the good news itself remains constant; but we change, as does the world around us. So we have to keep reflecting on what being Christian in *this* world at *this* point in history means. That's doing theology.

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

"I can't tell 'em that!" Use of Direct Instruction in Religious Education

(Richard Rymarz - *Journal of Religious Education* 60(1) 2012, 78-81)

Context

Let me begin with an emblematic story. I was once observing a trainee RE teacher take a senior Catholic high school class. The topic this day was stem cell research, one lesson in a unit dedicated to "ethics in the modern world". The class had a heavy focus on student centred learning. The main activity was students, working in groups, researching various aspects of stem cell research and then reporting back to the whole class. As I listened to these reports I noted that very few of the students seemed to realize the significance of the distinction between embryonic stem cells and adult stem cells. When I raised this with the teacher after the class she was adamant about her rationale. She saw her role as a teacher to facilitate learning and not to impose knowledge – indeed she commented, "I can't tell 'em that!" It was, therefore, the students' task to come up with crucial distinctions. This was seen as being a more pedagogically sound methodology as it was, amongst other things, much more likely to result in long term transformational learning. My point was that some direct instruction on the part of the teacher, in this case, pointing out to students some critical vocabulary and concepts – such as the distinction between adult and

embryonic stem cells far from inhibiting learning could actually facilitate it. My student teacher was sceptical and gently rebuked me for promoting an "empty vessel" approach to learning. This is a well-known analogy where teachers are seen as filling up the vacant heads of students.[1]

I think this narrative sets out some very important issues that are especially relevant to teaching in religious education. There is a great reluctance on the part of many RE teachers to use direct instruction in the classroom. Rymarz (2004) proffers a number of reasons for this and two of these will be mentioned here. Firstly, direct instruction can be seen as an educationally unsophisticated approach, more in keeping with bygone and outmoded instructional methodologies. Secondly, and related to this, RE teachers working in religiously affiliated schools in particular need to be vigilant about the dangers of imposing religious beliefs on students. This may be construed as a type of quasi-indoctrination – also a feature of an era now passed.

Guidelines for use of direct instruction in the classroom

General rationale

A number of recent studies have pointed out that direct instruction in the classroom has a place in contemporary pedagogy in a number of situations (Mayer & Moreno, 2003; Kirschner et al., 2006; Gredler, 2009; Hattie, 2009). Many of these insights dovetail with established theoretical approaches such as the Vygotskian paradigm of scaffolded learning and teachers being the mediators of student movement into the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1987). ZPD is the area between what students can do unaided and the most difficult task that they can undertake (Karpov, 2003). Use of direct instruction is best utilized within a contextualizing framework such as the following principles.

Lowering cognitive load

If students lack strong content knowledge of a particular area then they find it difficult to orientate themselves to a new topic (Mayer, 2004). What can happen in these instances is that the amount of exogenous[2] material that students encounter can severely restrict new learning. In these situations students have a relatively low saturation level, commonly understood as information overload. One such area is engagement with the basic contours of Christian belief and practice. Dean (2010) has pointed out that adolescents today have a poor grasp of the major tenets of the Christian narrative. In order to deal with this, teachers should be aware that students can very quickly become disorientated and disengaged, when doing topics with which they have very little connection. In these instances direct instruction can provide a mechanism by which students can enter into the conversation by at least giving them some key vocabulary and concepts.

In the classroom: Signposting

An effective DI[1] technique is to give students a sense of where the lesson sequence is going. Take a complex topic like, "Teachings of Paul". Teachers can signpost this topic by providing specific examples of key Pauline teachings. This gives students a sense of the scope and salience of Paul's writing and also what they will be expected to come up with during the course. It can also include key ideas, themes and terms in Paul's writings

None of this is supposed to override prior learning. Good teachers will always try to situate new learning within student prior knowledge. In some areas of religious education students will bring with them some misconceived ideas. These should be acknowledged and addressed, not as

[1] Let me note here that I was not convinced that the student teacher was aware of the difference between adult and embryonic stem cells. The issue of content knowledge of RE is perennial. No amount of discussion of pedagogical principles can distract us from the fundamental point that if RE teachers have poor content knowledge this will severely limit their capacity to teach well. Certainly self-described discovery learning cannot make up for teacher deficiencies.

[2] Coming from outside

the final word on the subject but as a prelude to further learning. In Vygotskian terms this is the recognition that students often have spontaneous concepts which may be incorrect but, nonetheless shape student perceptions (Chaiklin, 2003).

Time efficient and focussed

Direct instruction (DI) needs to be focussed both in terms of the amount of time devoted to it as well as toward content objectives. Good use of DI is time efficient. It cannot be too long or used too often. In a similar way, it should focus on these key elements that students need to know and would have difficulty finding out on their own volition (Mayer, 2004). To illustrate, many RE teachers cover topics related to morality and ethics. A key concept in these areas, from a Christian perspective, is conscience. The elaboration of the notion of conscience is a complex area but some assistance in providing key terminology can be of great assistance. It can be too much to expect students to, say, realize the importance of Augustine in deriving the modern notion of conscience and then to discover his definition. A teacher can provide these as a context for further leaning.

In the classroom: Use of definitions

Provide students with clear, concise and contextualized definitions of key concepts. Typically these are concepts that students would have great difficulty arriving at or finding on their own. The well-used definition is not closing the door on learning, rather it opens up possibilities

This sense of the teacher leading the way is very akin to Shulman's (1986) notion of teacher competence. Here the teacher needs to have mastery of content knowledge in order to be able to generate the stories, metaphors and analogies that can engage students. This is a question of quality of information not quantity. It is the ability to identify what are the key mediators and roadblocks to future learning.

What comes before and after?

DI should always be seen as part of an overall approach to learning. Many of the fears of teachers about using DI come from experience of it being used as the sole or dominant form of instruction. University courses, for instance, make heavy use of DI in the form of lectures. There is ample evidence that this is an unsatisfactory pedagogical model. When using DI in religious education a critical question is, "What comes next?" DI needs to be integrated into a learning strategy that aims to have students participating in an involved and engaged capacity.

In the classroom: DI: step by step

In planning when to use DI consider:

- What are my learning objectives for the lesson and the unit?
- What range of teaching and learning activities is being used?
- How will the unit be assessed?

If any of these questions reveal an overreliance on DI, reconsider your approach.

The problem with the stem cell lesson mentioned earlier was not that the teacher was relying on student directed learning. It was, to use a Vygotskian idea, that she was not providing sufficient support for the tasks to be meaningful (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). It would have been much more productive if students, after a range of teaching and learning strategies, including DI, were then encouraged to explore the theme in a more self-directed way.

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ARTISTS' CORNER

Mary Oliver helped us stay amazed

(Rachel Syme, January 19, 2019 The New Yorker)

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Mary Oliver died on Thursday, at the age of eighty-three, at her home, in Hobe Sound, Florida. But she spent most of her life near a far rockier beach, in the town of Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she lived, on and off, for more than forty years, with her long-term partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook, who died in 2005. Oliver lived a profoundly simple life: she went on long walks through the woods and along the shoreline nearly every day, foraging for both greens and poetic material. She kept her eyes peeled, always, for animals, which she thought about with great intensity and intimacy, and which often appear in her work not so much as separate species but as kindred spirits. In her poem "August," Oliver wrote about joy from the perspective of a gregarious bear: "In the dark / creeks that run by there is /

this thick paw of my life darting among / the black bells, the leaves; there is / this happy tongue." In 2013, she published "Dog Songs," a book of poems and short prose pieces about the passionate attachments between humans and canines. She wrote verse after verse about a little rescue mutt named Percy, about how he gazed up at her "as though I were just as wonderful / as the perfect moon."

With her consistent, shimmering reverence for flora and fauna, Oliver made herself one of the most beloved poets of her generation. She worked in the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth or Keats, but she also infused a distinctly American loneliness into her words—the solitary reflections of Thoreau gazing over a lake, or of Whitman peering from the Brooklyn Ferry at the shuffling tides below his feet. Hers were not poems about isolation, though, but about pushing beyond your own sense of emotional quarantine, even when you feel fear. Everywhere you look, in Oliver's verse, you find threads of connectivity. In "The Fish," in which she reflects on eating the first fish she ever caught, perhaps when she was a child growing up in Maple Heights, Ohio, she writes, "I am the fish, the fish / glitters in me; we are / risen, tangled together, certain to fall / back to the sea." The affinity she felt for the animal kingdom was something more than a banal idea of "oneness"; it was about the mutual acknowledgement of pain. Whatever the fish felt at his moment of death, Oliver assumed, she, too, would feel. And together they would both become part of the infinite churn.

Oliver rarely discussed it, but she escaped a dark childhood. She told Maria Shriver, who interviewed her for a special poetry issue of *Oprah* magazine, in 2011, that she was sexually abused as a child. "I was very little," she said. "But I had recurring nightmares; there's damage." We are just now starting to have broader cultural conversations about women's trauma, about how so many women move through the world with heavy burdens. But for more than five decades Oliver gave voice to the process of confronting one's dark places, of peering underneath toadstools and into stagnant ponds. And, when she looked there, she found forgiveness. She found grace. She found that she was allowed to love the world. When she writes, in her poem "When Death Comes," "I want to say all my life / I was a bride married to amazement," she tells us that wonder has to be earned. Marriages are hard work; they take nurturing and constant vigilance. By comparing herself to a bride, she yoked herself to being amazed; she gave herself the lifelong assignment, however difficult, of looking up.

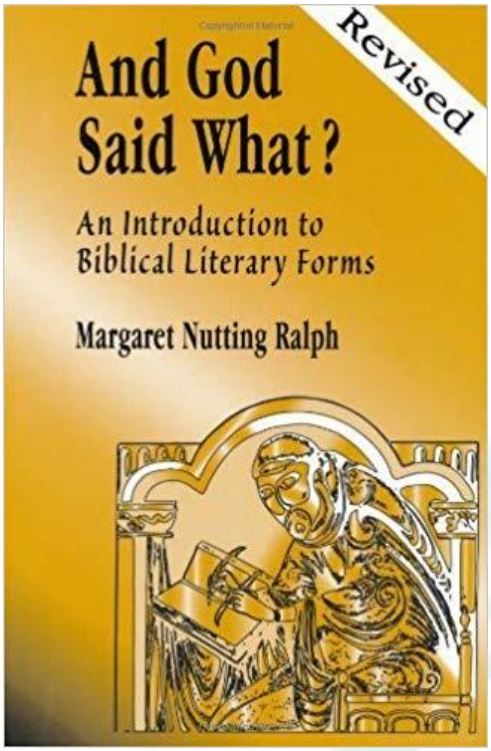
Some Questions You Might Ask

Is the soul solid, like iron? Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?

REVIEW

And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms

(Margaret Nutting Ralph. Paulist Press; Revised edition (January 2, 2003))



320 pages
ISBN-10: 0809141299; ISBN-13: 978-0809141296
This revised edition of the best-selling *And God Said What?* introduces readers to the importance of understanding the various literary forms that appear in Scripture: myth, legend, debate, fiction, Gospel, parable, allegory, letter and apocalypse. Each genre is clearly defined, and the importance of understanding genre in order to find meaning is explored in relation to many well-known biblical passages: Samson, Lot's wife, Jonah, puzzling parables, 666, and many more. Written by an experienced teacher who has listened carefully to her students' questions, this book is an invaluable help to those who want to understand the revelation contained in the old and new covenants.

Margaret Nutting Ralph is secretary of educational ministries for the Roman Catholic diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, and director of the Master's Degree programs for Roman Catholics at Lexington Theological Seminary. She is the author of eight books on Scripture and has given workshops on Scripture throughout the U.S. and in Canada.

The book is available on Amazon at $15,98.

NEWS

Greta Thunberg nominated for Nobel peace prize

Thursday 14 March 2019 - Climate strike founder put up for award ahead of global strikes planned in more than 105 countries (www.theguardian.com)

Greta Thunberg, 15, holds a placard reading 'School strike for the climate', during a protest outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm last November.

Greta Thunberg, the founder of the Youth Strike for Climate movement, has been nominated for the Nobel peace prize, just before the biggest day yet of global action.

Thunberg began a solo protest in Sweden in August but has since inspired students around the globe. Strikes are expected in 1,659 towns and cities in 105 countries on Friday, involving hundreds of thousands of young people.

"We have proposed Greta Thunberg because if we do nothing to halt climate change it will be the cause of wars, conflict and refugees," said Norwegian Socialist MP Freddy André Øvstegård. "Greta Thunberg has launched a mass movement which I see as a major contribution to peace."

"[I am] honoured and very grateful for this nomination," said Thunberg on Twitter. Tomorrow we #schoolstrike for our future. And we will continue to do so for as long as it takes." She has already challenged leaders in person at the UN climate summit in late 2018 and at Davos in January. "Change is coming whether they like it or not," she said.

National politicians and some university professors can nominate candidates for the Nobel peace prize, which will be awarded in December. There are 301 candidates for the 2019 prize: 223 individuals and 78 organisations.

In 2014, the peace prize was awarded to 17-year-old Malala Yousafzai, "for the struggle ... for the right of all children to education". She survived a Taliban assassination attempt in 2012.

While some politicians have opposed the school strikes, many have supported them, including Germany's Angela Merkel and Ireland's Leo Varadkar. The mayors of Paris, Milan, Sydney, Austin, Philadelphia, Portland, Oslo, Barcelona and Montreal added their backing on Thursday.

"It is truly inspiring to see young people, led by brilliant young women, making their voices heard and demanding urgent climate action. They are absolutely correct that our actions today will determine their futures," said Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris and chair of the C40 group of cities. "My message to young citizens is clear: it is our responsibility as adults and political leaders to learn from you and deliver the future you want."

The strikes have also been supported by the former head of the Anglican Church Rowan Williams and the head of Amnesty International, Kumi Naidoo. "Children are often told they are 'tomorrow's leaders'. But if they wait until 'tomorrow' there may not be a future in which to lead," said Naidoo. "Young people are putting their leaders to shame with the passion and determination they are showing to fight this crucial battle now.

Music programme 'boost creativity'

The Southern Cross, March 13 to March 19, 2019

Choir admin badges awarded to Thandiwe Bhengu, Athenkosi Maphalala and Zamathaba Mathaba

All learners need an outlet, other than pencil and paper, to express themselves and this is one of the many reasons why learners should get involved in the school music and cultural programme.

This is the view of Holy Family College in Durban which put its advice into action when members of the school's choir participated in a choir workshop.

"The knowledge and skills learned will help the participants to develop confidence as they master singing in the school choir," the school said.

Another programme for learners is the recently established Ukusamusic programme, which offers the opportunity to learn an instrument such as piano, guitar or saxophone.

The philosophy behind the programme is that learning an instrument improves concentration, reinforces self-discipline and boosts creativity.

Holy Family College offers several extracurricular of activities and clubs, believing that involvement in school activities helps build positive memories which learners can look back on when they are older.

Crossing Borders with Hope

Jenny Cafiso (Canadian Jesuits International, February 2019)

As I write this, over 7,000 Honduran migrants including children have crossed the Guatemalan and Mexican borders and are marching toward the United States border. Some, including the President of the US, are describing them as murderers, rapists, "very bad criminals". Helicopters are hovering over them, the border patrol and the military have been alerted, ready to act. There are calls to close the border.

While some migrants have turned back, most are staying the course. Jose Mejia, 42, a father of four from the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula, was quoted as saying, "We are going to sleep here in the street, because we have nothing else".

I was in the same city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras just a month ago. This is where Radio Progreso and ERIC, a Jesuit radio station and human rights centre, work under the leadership of Fr Melo Coto. With the ERIC team, I visited communities where they work - and I understand why people are leaving the country.

I met Gerardo, a young journalist at Radio Progreso, who has received a number of death threats. His young son of 5 has told him he is afraid he will be killed. In a country where over 40 journalists have been killed since 2009, the threat is real. I asked Gerardo why he stays. He said it is because they are committed to the people. He probably is not in the caravan of migrants marching toward the US border, but if he were, I could understand why.

Two community leaders walked hours to tell us of their struggle against Canadian mining company Aura Minerals, which has not only polluted their rivers and land, but is now removing the cemetery where their family members are buried. With sadness and fear Manuel told me that his son, with no way to feed his family, has left to cross the border. He said he hopes that God will watch over him.

I visited the people in Campamento Guapinol in Tocoa who are blocking the entrance to a mine site, to "defend water and life". They await the arrival of the army to dislodge the camp. Perhaps some of them are now in the caravan crossing the border.

And I also met Belinda, in Guadalupe, Santa Fe, a fishing community of the Garifuna people, whose ancestral land has been bought by a Canadian businessman who is building a retirement community for Canadians. Their land was supposed to be protected, but now they fear that their access to the sea and fishing will be blocked. She and another leader have been charged for trespassing. I wonder if she too is in the caravan crossing the border.

In a country with the highest murder rate in the western hemisphere, where a woman is killed every 14 hours; a country with a strong network of organized crime linked to the passage of drugs destined for North America; where there is deep social conflict due to the large presence of mining companies; where there is extreme inequality and poverty; it is not surprising that thousands of people are leaving.

This year at Canadian Jesuits International (CJI) we chose *Bridging Borders* as the theme of our Giving Tuesday campaign. We did so, greatly inspired by Pope Francis' words "I appeal not to create walls but to build bridges" and deeply concerned by the politics of fear in our current context.

Bridging borders is not a vague concept or abstract wish. It is an engagement that involves the heart, a commitment to social justice. It requires concrete changes in the social structures that are at the basis of division, poverty and conflict. It means ensuring that everyone has access to the necessities of life like food, water, shelter, education, healthcare - not as privileges or gifts, but as rights. It means working so that people can live a life with dignity in their own lands free from violence, and where their livelihood is respected. It requires that we fight so that everyone has a voice, the right to express their opinion. It means working for the common good. Only then we can speak of *Bridging Borders.*

For us as Canadians it means ensuring that our mining companies operating overseas obtain free, prior and informed consent from the local communities where they work. It means giving aid that allows local economies to thrive, pushing for fair trading practices, cutting relations with governments which abuse human rights.

As Gerardo, the journalist living under death threat in Honduras said, "We need to be a light in the darkness".

Pope: Don't let robots run us

Carol Glatz

The CloudMinds XR-1 robot performs for visitors at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain. (Photo: Rafael Marchante, Reuters/CNS)

Technology holds the potential to benefit all of humankind, but it also poses risky and unforeseen results, Pope Francis said.

The rapid evolution of increased technological capacities, for example with artificial intelligence and robotics, creates a "dangerous enchantment; instead of handing human life the tools that will improve care, there is the risk of handing life over to the logic of instruments," he said.

"This inversion is destined to create ill-fated results—the machine is not limited to running by itself, but ends up running mankind," the pope said.

Pope Francis made his remarks during an audience with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life plenary assembly, which included a two-day workshop entitled "Roboethics: Humans, Machines and Health".

In his speech, the pope noted the "dramatic paradox" at work today: Just when humanity has developed the scientific and technological abilities to bring improved wellbeing more fairly and widely to everyone, instead there is increasing inequality and worsening conflict.

The problem is when technology is pursued solely for mastering a whole new ability while neglecting technology's true purpose and for whom it is meant, Pope Francis said.

Technology should never be seen as a "foreign and hostile" force against humanity because it is a human invention—a product of human creativity and genius.

That is why technology should always be at the service of humanity and respectful of every human person's dignity, he said.

The pope encouraged continued dialogue and contributions by people of faith in the quest for universally shared values and criteria to help guide technological research and development.

Having ethical guidelines can help leaders and those in positions of authority to make the right decisions and help protect human rights and the planet, Pope Francis said.—CNS

UPCOMING EVENTS

Laurence Freeman 2019

Laurence Freeman OSB was born in London in 1951. He was educated by the Benedictines and studied English Literature at Oxford University. After working at the United Nations, in merchant banking and journalism, he entered Ealing Abbey as a Benedictine monk.

His teacher and spiritual guide was Dom John Main. After studying with Fr. John during his novitiate and helping with the establishment of the first Christian Meditation Centre in London, Fr Laurence accompanied him to Canada where they formed a new kind of Benedictine Community, teaching and practising meditation. From here began the expansion of his teaching Christian Meditation around the world. Fr Laurence was ordained in 1980.

After John Main's death in 1982, Fr. Laurence succeeded him and when the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) was formed in 1991, with its international Office in London, he became its spiritual guide.

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Olivetan Congregation and he serves and has built up community of meditation groups and centres throughout the world in over 120 countries.

Among other events, Fr Laurence will be offering seminars for teachers in **Cape Town** (*Friday 6 September 2019*), **Durban** (*Tuesday 10 September*), and **Johannesburg** (*Thursday 12 September*). Further details will be available shortly.

To qualify for CPTD points, answer the following questions.

Current Thinking about Religious Education in Catholic Schools (Part 1)

TRUE/FALSE (Tick the correct box) According to the author of this article or those quoted

	STATEMENT	TRUE	FALSE
1	South Africa has escaped the various influences of globalisation, secularisation and cultural postmodernity		
2	For many young people, elements of identity are seen as being shaped by personal choice, rather than by culture, religion or biology.		
3	For young people today, being religious is one choice among many		
4	Schillebeeckx describes the radical change of attitude in society as one that now looks primarily to the past		
5	More and more people today describe themselves as spiritual but not religious		
6	A common form of contemporary spirituality is individualistic, eclectic, subjective, secular and personally constructed.		
7	When entering the Religious Education classroom it is wise for the teacher to make assumptions about the faith of their students.		
8	The ineffectiveness of organized religion today is due to its failure to speak to the pre-religious God awareness.		
9	Grajczonek argues that the starting point should be with children's religiosity.		
10	The approach to be taken is bringing students to the beginning point of seeing that religion does have something valuable to contribute.		

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