

# IDENTITY AND CHANGE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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*Note on the politics of education*

**B**OTH PLATO AND ARISTOTLE WROTE about education within what they considered its proper philosophical context – politics. They had a rather obvious insight, but one that later educators would often forget. When Paulo Freire began writing in the early 1970s about education as a ‘political activity’ it was heard by many as a novel idea.<sup>1</sup> Clearly ‘politics’ had become narrowed to party politics. But in ancient Greece *politike* meant the art of enabling the shared life of citizens, and should still include any deliberate attempt to influence how people live their lives in society or to shape their identity as social beings. With this understanding of politics, education must be recognized as an eminently political activity. Nothing is more intended or more likely to shape how people live in society, their values, perspectives and style of participation, than their education.

Its politics is precisely why the nation state sees education as integral to its responsibility. Whether it directly or indirectly sponsors the schooling, the state has every right to monitor the education of its citizens. The state educates, not simply to care for the future and well-being of individuals, especially the rising generation, but for its own future and the common good as well. Though western democracies readily point the finger at totalitarian regimes for their ideological control of education, in fact every state’s survival depends on how its citizens are educated. And quite appropriately a state’s educational interest is primarily one of socialization, of forming people in *identity* appropriate to this context.

In other words, all states educate people to ‘fit in’ with the perspectives, values, labour needs and general ideology of this group of people. Though good social liberals may protest this as domestication rather than education, without it no social entity would survive, and new generations would become ‘misfits’ in their own context, unable to participate in its shared life, poorly equipped to earn a living in its job market, and so on. Thomas Jefferson wisely recognized that the new

Republic would not survive as a democracy without an educated populace; and, I would add, one educated in a particular way. An autocracy, a totalitarian regime, a benevolent dictatorship or any other system would require another kind of education.

Dewey was hopeful that a democracy could be trusted to educate rather than simply to propagandize its population. But he had no doubt that even the democratic state has the responsibility 'to guide' what citizens learn: 'The natural or native impulses of the young do not agree with the lived customs of the group into which they are born. Consequently, they have to be directed or guided.'<sup>2</sup> And he wrote that 'the teacher is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth'.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, though Dewey was keenly supportive of the socialization intent of education, he was equally convinced that education should never settle for such limited purpose or social conservatism. Echoing the whole humanistic tradition of western education, he was convinced that good education must put the person 'in complete possession of all (one's) powers' and should give the ability and confidence 'to change (one's) mind'.<sup>4</sup> To be worthy of the name and fitting to the dignity of the human person, education must be an antidote to crass propagandizing and move far beyond socialization. The very etymology of the term (*educare*: to 'lead out' and its cognate *educere*: to 'draw out') implies an ongoing process, a growing realization of potential, an opening out to new possibilities and horizons, a never-ending journey into fresh discoveries and new moments of opportunity.

In this 'change' aspect too education is political, not the politics of maintenance but of personal realization as a social being. This is precisely why, for Dewey, 'education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform'.<sup>5</sup> Education that enables people 'to change their minds' moves them far beyond being the creatures of their social context to become its creators and recreators as well. Here education's intent affirms but transcends the valid interest of identity to promote the confidence and willingness to change, to foster the ability to think for oneself, to be open to the novel and to the 'other', refusing to ossify any perspective, to be a reformer of one's social context rather than simply a defender.

It would seem then, apropos the theme of this issue of *The Way*, that education should promote both identity and change, both socialization and the realization of the unfolding potential of the individual. Rather than collapsing the tension between them in terms of either/or, education should deliberately maintain it. My claim, of course, reflects a

particular anthropology and even a Christian understanding of human existence. I readily grant as much and, without digressing to review it in detail, let me note that the anthropology recommended by Catholic/Christian faith is marked by the following salient features: that humankind is made in the likeness of our creator God (Gen 1:27), an image that is never totally lost; that God has made us for creative partnership in community, for a covenant of 'right relationship' with God, self, others and creation; and that the grace of God in Jesus Christ internally renews each person to grow in the likeness of our Triune God (i.e. a God of relationship even within Godself). Such an anthropology demands education that both forms people's identity within community, and enhances the person's creativity and personal agency to live in 'right relationship'. In gist, Christian faith recommends education that informs and forms people in both identity and openness to change.

Maintaining this fruitful tension is the challenge of all education. However, for reasons I review below, in no education is it more urgent or more challenging than in Christian religious education. My own alleged expertise and the spirituality interest of readers of *The Way* advise that I focus my remaining remarks on this particular instance of education. I hope, however, that whatever wisdom I have for this 'most difficult of cases' will be suggestive for education in general.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The 'difficult case' of Christian religious education*

For the sake of this essay, I must take for granted that Christian religious education intends to inform and form the identity of its participants, to touch and nurture their very 'being' in Christian faith. At least this is how I use the term here: as education carried on by a Christian community with the 'intended learning outcome' of identity in Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, I take such an enterprise to be an imperative of Christian faith and of the mission of the Church. When the risen Christ commissioned the first Christian community assembled in Galilee to 'go teach all nations' it is clear that this was not to sponsor some 'objective' study of religion but to make disciples.

Note too that this mandate of Christ (see Mt 28:16–20) emphasizes formation *in agency as well as identity*; it is not enough to bring people into the community and thus identity through baptism, they must also be taught to 'observe all that I have commanded you'. Christian faith is a way of life. Beyond giving people a sense of themselves as belonging to a Christian culture or community, Christian religious education must also nurture people in the agency of Christian faith, to dispose them to live it – to realize its creed, code and cult in their daily lives. More than the

forming of identity, it is this call to agency in Christian faith that encourages a dynamic of change and development.

In addition to encouraging identity/agency, the very nature of Christian faith requires education that both nurtures belonging to a faith community and tradition, and opens people to a journey of lifelong conversion. A 'living faith' demands such vitality and openness. In the motif of the Hebrew scriptures, 'God's people' are a pilgrim people, and Jesus summons disciples to constant *metanoia* as followers of 'the way'.

That Christian faith calls disciples to growth, openness and change runs throughout Christian tradition, especially in Christian spirituality. God's infinite desire for us always invites us to grow in our response to God's unconditional love. Likewise, our own reciprocal desire for God, present in us because of God's prior desire for us, is incapable of being ultimately satisfied at any point on our faith journey. For Christian spirituality, there can never be a 'resting on our oars'; in the classic line of Augustine, 'For thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee'.

On this side of eternity, God is never quite finished with us. In fact, the great spiritual mentors advise that Christian faith which is not evolving and developing is likely to die; that a living faith demands change or, as I prefer here, 'openness'; this is true both for the faith community and the individual. Christian faith is much more like a stream than a monument, more an ever flowing river of life than a museum piece from bygone days.<sup>8</sup> Such openness to new horizons in faith is an urgent issue for Christian religious education.

As noted already, the task to promote both identity/agency and change/openness is not only very challenging but also a most complex one for education in Christian faith. As I see it, the complexity is heightened by the dual threats of *authoritarianism* and *sectarianism*; I will comment briefly on each.

Similar to all great religious traditions and from its beginning, Christianity has been marked by a sense of its own authority, by an aura of normativity for its disciples. It was said of Jesus himself that 'he taught them as one having authority' (Mt 7:29), and the first Christian communities believed that this authority was passed on to their leadership. In time, too, Christians recognized their canonical scriptures as having authority in faith, grounded in their conviction that these writings reflected how God had revealed Godself first to the people of Israel, and then, in the fullness of time and with a primordial sense of revelation, in God's own Son, Jesus (see Heb 1:1-2).

Beyond this authority of the biblical word, Catholicism especially became deeply convinced that the community of faith and its tradition

over time are likewise sources of 'authority' in faith, precisely because the Church is guided in its teaching ministry by God's Holy Spirit. When the Church teaches, and especially through its magisterium of the Petrine office in union with the world episcopacy, such teaching has a normativity for Christians. Though Catholicism has always held to what Vatican II called 'a hierarchy of truths',<sup>9</sup> descending from defined or constitutive dogma down to common teachings, its teaching authority has meant that all the Church's pronouncements in matters of 'faith or morals' must be taken seriously by Catholics. To varying degrees, all Christian denominations claim such normativity in faith for their members.

But the teaching authority of the Church can also be abused and deteriorate to 'authoritarianism'. Without caution, it can encourage an absolutizing of one historically particular articulation of 'the faith', making it sound closed, hardened, banishing all mystery and demanding blind assent without question or reflection. Such authoritarianism forbids people to think for themselves in matters of faith. It refuses to be open to new possibilities, forgetting Jesus' wisdom that 'scribes' learned in the reign of God should be able to take from the 'storeroom' both the old and the new (see Mt 13: 52). It presumes that this human word is the 'last word' about God's word in scripture and tradition. It epitomizes what Michel Foucault well called 'knowledge control',<sup>10</sup> and claims a rational certainty that ironically reflects a lack of faith; it echoes the original sin of wanting to have 'knowledge like unto the gods' (Gen 3:5).

Authoritarianism in the teaching ministry of the Church attempts to legislate the truth rather than teaching by persuasion, it forbids discussion in controversial matters that are far from settled. It gives the impression that Catholicism is not a complex and open tradition that welcomes diversity (truly 'catholic'), but instead is an unquestionable and closed system that one must accept *in toto*, or place oneself outside of it entirely. Such authoritarianism – and the pages of history as well as our present ecclesial polity are rife with instances of it – is clearly capable of giving people a strong sense of identity, but militates mightily against change and openness and thus against *metanoia* and maturity in a living Christian faith.

Sectarianism is a danger for all religious traditions and pertains especially to how a faith community attempts to educate religiously. By 'sectarianism' here I mean a bigoted attitude that absolutizes truth and goodness in one's own position and perspective, and sees nothing but error and evil in any 'other'. Sectarianism can be encouraged by an overly enthusiastic attempt to form people's faith identity within a

particular community. Ironically, when a Christian community makes it sound as if it is the sole deposit of the fullness of religious truth and that every other community is in error, it denies a central doctrine of Christian faith, namely the universality of God's love. For Christian religious education the crucial issue here is how to ground people in the particular truth and historical richness of their own tradition and community, but to do so in a way that convinces them of the universality of God's love, that opens them to respect and learn from traditions and peoples other than one's own. In gist, the issue is how to form both Christian identity and openness to 'the other'.

### *Educational response*

How then can Christian religious education respond to the challenge to educate for both identity and openness in faith, avoiding the threats of authoritarianism and sectarianism? Here I can only be suggestive; I will make a general proposal and then review briefly. Education for identity and openness in Christian faith requires: (a) the context of Christian faith communities; and (b) is best served by an intentional pedagogy that (i) personally engages people in the teaching/learning dynamic (ii) enables them to express and question their lives and faith (iii) gives them direct access to their heritage of Christian story and vision (iv) encourages them to make Christian faith and identity their own (v) and invites them to live as Christian disciples with imagination and openness to the ongoing journey.<sup>11</sup>

#### *(a) Christian community*

Since the call of Abraham and Sarah, we have sensed that God calls us individually but in the midst of a people, that it takes the context of a 'people of God' to live as a 'person of God'. The communal nature of Christian faith echoes throughout the New Testament, epitomized by Jesus' call to community and especially in his table fellowship, by his 'great commandment' to love God by loving neighbour as self, and by Paul's many communal images but especially his model of Church as 'the Body of Christ'. The early Christians enshrined the catechetical role of community with the catechumenal process, which was based on the central conviction that to become a Christian disciple requires the socializing influence of a Christian community.

In addition to this biblical perspective on the communal nature of faith, all the social sciences advise that our human identity is shaped and mediated by the culture and social context in which we were raised and now reside (primary and secondary socialization, respectively). Why

would Christian identity be any different? To become Christian, to remain Christian, to grow in the holiness of life that is Christian faith development, we require the context of Christian faith community. Of course not every community that claims to be Christian is equally so; but the more authentically Christian a community is, the more suitable it is to nurture people in Christian faith. This begs the question, what is a Christian community?

From the beginning, the Church has understood itself as called to be an effective and credible community of the reign of God in Jesus Christ, to carry on his mission and ministry in the world. Within this overarching purpose of God's reign, the first Christian communities discerned that they had at least four particular tasks: of *kerygma* – to preach, teach and evangelize the *word* of God mediated through scripture and tradition; of *koinonia* – to be a Christian community of faith, hope and love, giving living *witness* to its faith; of *leitourgia* – to assemble as community to give public *worship* to God; and of *diakonia* – to care for human *welfare*, spiritual and temporal. These fourfold ministries of *word*, *witness*, *worship* and *welfare* were seen as the responsibility of all Christians and of every Christian community; discipleship was truly 'inclusive'.

When we wed awareness of the communal nature of Christian 'being' and becoming with these four ministries of Christian community, we readily recognize that every Christian family, parish and school is to carry on these ministries in order to participate in the socializing process of Christian faith. For Christian faith education, we must 'think community' and this includes every context 'where two or three are gathered' with any self-identification in Christian faith.

We take for granted that the parish is to carry on Christian ministry, and its fourfold functions. But for education in Christian faith, the Christian school too, parochial or otherwise, is also to develop the ethos and carry on the ministries of a Christian community. As a recent Vatican document on Catholic education advises: 'The climate of a Catholic school . . . should create conditions for a formation process' and 'the Gospel spirit should permeate all facets of the school climate'.<sup>12</sup> Quite clearly, a Christian school should include study of 'the word' of scripture and tradition in its formal curriculum, but likewise it should be a place of worship – providing opportunity for liturgy and communal prayer, for retreats and spiritual nurture, etc.; it should have a community ethos that witnesses to the values of Christian faith; and it should provide students with the opportunity for service to human need as integral to its curriculum.

Likewise, we must move beyond rhetoric in calling the family 'the domestic Church'.<sup>13</sup> (We must also break open what we mean by

'family'; I use it here as one's original or immediate network of primary personal relationships.) For the sake of the faith of its members, and as appropriate to familial context, every Christian family should have access to God's word in scripture and to Christian tradition, should become a community of Christian witness, of shared ritual and prayer, and of outreach to the poor and oppressed. Without such Christian community, it is highly unlikely that people will take on or grow in Christian identity.

*(b) An intentional pedagogy*

Though the socializing power of Christian faith communities is imperative for education in Christian faith, so too is an intentional pedagogy. While the faith community educates, it is always in need of faith education, and likewise every member within it. Socialization alone might promote Christian identity, but it does not as readily encourage agency, and is far less likely to avoid the dangers of authoritarianism and sectarianism and to encourage openness and change in one's faith journey. The latter intent requires an intentional approach of critical education.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, my own sense of the pedagogy best advised for both identity and openness is as follows:

(i) For identity that also has personal autonomy, and for openness that originates from the existential subject, students need to be actively engaged in the teaching/learning dynamic of Christian faith education. Rather than being treated as passive recipients of what Freire calls 'banking education', they must become active participants whose full faculties for knowing are personally employed. These faculties especially entail their reason, memory and imagination. Required is a process that encourages people to think for themselves, to be and become agent 'subjects' of their faith rather than dependent 'objects'.

(ii) Participants of all ages should be brought to express and name their own lives (what Dewey calls 'experience' or Freire 'praxis'), and to reflect critically on what is 'going on' for them personally and in their social context. Such self-expression is essential to the kind of autonomy that encourages both authentic identity and openness to change. By critical reflection I mean encouraging people to question their lives and faith, to remember their biographical and social influences, and to imagine new possibilities for themselves and their community. Such reflection is an antidote to passive reception, and thus to hardened authoritarianism or narrow sectarianism.

(iii) Christian religious education must give people direct access to the story and vision of Christian faith. I use 'story' as a metaphor for the

whole tradition of Christian faith, its scriptures, traditions and liturgy, its values, virtues and ethic, and so on. By 'vision' I mean the response that Christian faith invites from the lives of its adherents, and the new possibilities it symbolizes for people's lives. Without the story, Christian identity is impossible; and, as the Good Book says, 'without the vision the people perish' (Prov 29:18), the ongoingness of the faith journey is pre-empted. Christian story/vision should always be represented more as a flowing river than a monument or museum piece, as a living and vibrant faith. Giving people 'access' implies making the tradition available but without imposition. 'Direct access' means putting people personally in touch with its symbols, enabling them to encounter 'the faith' through personal experience of its word and sacrament. Such direct access to Christian story/vision encourages both identity and agency in response to it.

(iv) Christian religious education should encourage participants critically to appropriate Christian story/vision to their lives, to think about it with a view to coming to see for themselves its meaning and ethic. Such appropriation advises especially a kind of reflective questioning that encourages people to make the tradition their own, with personal persuasion and conviction.

(v) Christian religious education requires a pedagogy that invites people to decision fuelled by imagination. Decision-making is essential for identity that is realized in agency; imagination is needed to encourage openness and the ongoingness of the journey in Christian faith.<sup>15</sup>

My suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities for appropriate Christian religious education, but I am convinced that the context of Christian community is needed, and likewise an intentional pedagogy that is participative, instructive and reflective, if we are to educate for both identity and openness in Christian faith.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p 47.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, 'My pedagogic creed' in *Dewey on education*, compiled by Martin S. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971), p 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 30.

<sup>6</sup> For another treatment of the theme of this essay, different but very insightful, see Padraic O'Hare, 'Education for devotion and inquiry', *Religious Education* vol 76, no 5 (Sept–Oct 1981).

<sup>7</sup> In some literature of the field, the term 'religious education' is often used to refer to a more academic and 'objective' study of religious tradition(s), and the term 'catechesis' (or Christian education in Protestantism) is used more of the socialization process of Christian faith formation.

Here I prefer not to separate study from formation and thus use the term 'Christian religious education'. For further elaboration on this issue, see my essay 'Catechesis and religious education: "Let's Stay Together"', *The Living Light* (Fall, 1992), pp 40–45.

<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is echoed in the contemporary research literature on faith development; Fowler et al report empirical evidence that for the existential subject 'faith' is always a journey, and can develop through as many as six different stages on its way to full maturity. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of faith*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> 'Decree on Ecumenism', *Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, ed (New York: America Press, 1966), par 11, p 354.

<sup>10</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> I have written in great detail about such an approach to Christian religious education in *Sharing faith: a comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991). In this essay I can offer only the briefest summary of what I call a 'shared Christian praxis' approach to faith education.

<sup>12</sup> The Congregation for Catholic Education, *The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school* (Washington DC: USCC, 1988), pp 24–25.

<sup>13</sup> Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church*, par 11, Abbott, p 29.

<sup>14</sup> For further reflection on the need for 'critical education' in the midst of socialization, see Groome, *Sharing faith*, pp 100–106.

<sup>15</sup> For a more complete summary of this approach that I term 'shared Christian praxis', see *Sharing faith*, especially Ch 4.