

GUEST EDITORIAL

THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The editor of this journal has invited me to contribute something on the topic of theology and its relation to religious education. As a theologian, I am writing as one committed to furthering the many-sided conversation between these two disciplines, especially in the setting of a Catholic university. Such a conversation is embodied in the fact that many of our best theologians have a religious-education background, just as many of our religious educators have impressive theological qualifications. Theology and religious education meet and interweave in all kinds of ways – which is to the advantage of both disciplines.

Still, what might be presumed to be an easy enough exchange is notably complicated when theology and religious education belong to different faculties of the university—with all complexities that emerge from that odd situation, at least for a Catholic university. But that is not the point here.

Part of our predicament is specialisation. To accommodate the poet's words, some involved in faith-education might have the experience but miss the meaning—in the sense of working with a rather wan and thin theology. On the other hand, we theologians might have a surfeit of meaning but miss the experience—especially that of the wonder and challenges involved in communicating the faith to the next generation. Extremes are clearly identifiable, as when religious/faith educators find themselves “doing theology” sometimes in opposition or rivalry to the theologians around the corner; or when theologians are so innocent of any religious educational concern that they veer toward an arid and abstract irrelevance. These problems are lessened to the degree we are able candidly to admit our need for each other. Religious education without theology lacks content; theology insensitive to religious education is out of touch.

Let me say, however, that theology can and must learn from the experience of the religious educator. Take a practical and ecclesial perspective. Theology, above all in ecclesiology, must necessarily reflect on the community and mission of the Church. In the experience of the Catholic community in Australia, the mission of the Church has been massively connected to that extraordinary, “Catholic Education System”. If theology should feel tempted to bypass this “given” in the Church's experience in this country, it is simply not attending to the most evident data concerning how the Church is formed and how the Church has understood its mission. It may be desirable for theology to keep a certain critical distance, since the community and mission of the Church to society and its culture are more than any educational system. On the other hand, religious educators and those they teach have a first-hand experience of communicating with youth—the future formers of society and culture—and this is of immense theological importance. Not to be concerned with *that*, not to value the engaged experience of religious education and the educators involved, means that theology is living in a bubble floating away from the world—and the Church—as it is.

There is a more sophisticated way of putting this matter. Take Lonergan's *Method in Theology* (1972). In its fullest sense, theology is presented as “mediating between a cultural matrix and the meaning and role of religion in that matrix” (p. xi). Culture is understood here in the fairly pragmatic terms as the meanings and values that inform a given way of life. Obviously, this “mediation” cannot happen all at once, or be achieved by any one person. It needs a “framework of collaborative creativity”—and so stimulates the collaboration and creativity of many specialisations.

I delay on theological method only to make an important point on theology's relationship to religious education. Take, for instance, Lonergan's rather complex description of the “framework” that holds together what he understands to be an eightfold process of collaboration. These eight theological activities arise in order to respect the dynamic structure of human consciousness. To be a creative agent in any situation, we must first attend to experience. That exposure to experience provokes questions for understanding: what does it all mean? That kind of question presents us with the need to come to a reasonable discernment or judgement on the truth of the many possible meanings. Once that is resolved, responsible decisions can follow.

Now, theological activity is historical. It happens in history, not above it. Theology has a past, and has a responsibility for the future. In the effort to respect its past, theology must busy itself in gathering the data of

its past experience (Research), and go on accurately to interpret what it finds (Interpretation). It must set all this in a larger stream of events that affect our present (History), and face up to the problems and enduring conflicts that emerge (Dialectics). But then, in a creative concern for the future, theologians have to objectify their respective standpoints, and the human, Christian and, in this case, Catholic imperatives that affect a particular outlook (Foundations). If this is to be critically honest, it must be followed by the effort to clarify the priorities and the non-negotiable features that flow from the standpoint and its imperatives (Doctrines). But that might leave us only with a disjointed list of things to be believed or done—hence the necessity of working these basic positions into a coherent whole or panoramic view (Systematics). But this whole process is not complete without Communications—the point where theological activity makes renewed contact with the culture, with the resources developed in the other seven specialisations.

It is here that religious education is of vital importance—as a theological instance of Communications. For it is a specialised way of communicating with particular aspects of culture and society, as represented in youth, their parents, families and parish communities and so on. The specialised activities of religious education will, in its turn generate new data – demanding further research, interpretation, historical perspectives, diagnosing conflicts, clarifying standpoints, rearranging priorities, filling out the big picture – and beginning the process of communication all over again!

If religious educators might be alarmed by such a theological understanding of what they are doing, their anxieties might be lessened by my pointing out that they are not doing a lesser form of theology, but involved in its major purpose, namely, to communicate the meaning and value of faith to the culture.

Some might further object that is all too specific, given the multiple demands on the religious educator in the pluralistic, multi-faith culture of the present day. But here the words of the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana, are worth pondering with our topic in mind:

Any attempt to speak without speaking a particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. Thus, any living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens up and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in, whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not, is what we mean by having a religion (Cited by Clifford C. Geertz in M. Banton, Ed.)

Theologically speaking, there is no “religion in general”, just as there can be no language in general. It is specific, particular, living within a distinctive horizon which affects every aspect of life, its meaning and its value. Here we come up against the familiar problem of the individual and the universal. To opt uncritically for the universal can result in dissolving all particularity. To hold defensively to the particular can lead to a fundamentalist ghetto. Christian faith has from its origins lived in a multi-cultural world. Theology, with the forms of education it animated, finds itself involved in the never-ending task of elaborating the universality of its message from the particularity of its commitment to Christ. In him the universality of God’s saving will for all, and the particular manner in which God has entered our history, come together: the universal is embodied in the particular, and the particular opened out to the universal.

This is the juncture at which theology and religious education need to meet. The world we share, the country we live in, the language we speak, would all be unimaginable to the writers of the New Testament. Yet, in this time and in this world, faith must continue to seek, not only to understand more fully what it believes, but also to communicate the creativity of its beliefs, its hopes, and its loves in the most appropriate forms of religious education.

This summary reflection suggests three conclusions regarding the relationship of theology to religious education:

1. Theology must be a theology *of* religious education — integral to the mission of the Church, and to the theological process itself.
2. Theology must be a theology *in* religious education, as suggested in the words of Santayana just cited. Admittedly, this is a limitless area: it calls on the results of any or all of the eight specialisations noted above, as they have borne fruit in biblical and historical studies, and all the various kinds of theology: systematic, moral, liturgical, liberational, ecumenical, spiritual and so on.

3. Theology must be a theology *for* religious education, as the various specialised studies of theologians allow themselves to be influenced by the experience of religious educators in the common aim of communicating the meaning and values of Christian faith to contemporary culture.

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References

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JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Volume 54(3) 2006



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Regional Council

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR TOLERANCE

Tolerance is one of the fundamental values on which liberal democracies are based. And as such, it underpins education – which sets out to inform about cultural and other differences, and to promote and celebrate them. Religious education in particular aims at developing respect for religions and at promoting inter-religious dialogue. But in recent times, much has happened to put tolerance on a shaky foundation. Popular opinion is more suspicious of immigrants and asylum seekers. The fear of terrorism has increased feelings of xenophobia and mistrust. National identities are felt to be more exclusive of minorities. Anxiety about the future tends to limit people's horizons to their own immediate concerns.

This is then a time for taking stock of what is happening to the fortunes of tolerance in society. Religious education has some role in this appraisal to see what might be done within this discipline and its application in various contexts to promote tolerance.

A number of scholars have been invited to contribute to a special edition in 2006 titled *Religious Education for Tolerance*. It will address a range of issues such as:

- Interpretation of contemporary problems related to tolerance.
- Analysis of relevant research, including ethnographic studies.
- The challenge of religious diversity in a harmonious society.
- Tolerance and the various fundamentalisms.
- Educating for intercultural and interreligious dialogue.
- Conflicts related to religious, ethnic, indigenous and national identities.
- Tolerance in a world affected by violence, war and terrorism.
- Religious education and the development of tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity.
- Promoting tolerance through curricula and student resources.
- Religion studies programs and religious tolerance.
- Engaging with religious questions in an informed and critical way.
- Procedures and skills for constructive criticism of different religions.