

## Talent, tolerance and tact<sup>i</sup>: on avoiding the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth: A question of talent

In Matthew 25:14-30 there is the startling parable of the investor who went on a journey, and who, before he left, gave to three of his servants large amounts of money. To one he gave ten talents of silver, to another five and to the third one. When the investor returned after a long time he called the servants to account. The two who had taken risks and realised a healthy profit he rewarded. The man who hid his talent and, therefore, did not even gain bank interest was severely punished. He was cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is a harrowing tale to those of us disinclined to take risks.

In Jesus' day 'talent' meant a weight of money and one talent weighed a lot. Sometime in the fifteenth century this gospel story acquired a new meaning, the idea that we have natural gifts and capacities and that like the money in Matthew's parable they are there to be developed, not hidden in a field.

Some people do not develop their talents because nature or social conditions conspire against them. My father would have made a good teacher. But his family, the times, the condition of working class Catholics in Australia, the inadequate state of Catholic education in country towns and villages, the comparative isolationism of Catholics, the Depression and the War all got in the way.

Then there are those who are stopped more or less deliberately from developing their talents. Ideology, authoritarian leadership, the misuse of power, fear, ignorance, corruption and incompetence are just some of the enemies of talent that can infest states, churches, religious orders, schools, and families.

Some people choose not to develop particular talents. But this could be just 'opportunity cost'. A person with several abilities would rather be a teacher than a merchant banker; someone outstanding at sport wants to be a musician instead; someone who would make a good Catholic priest might value or need intimacy and marriage more.

Then there are others who fritter or throw away talent; who choose not to be as fully human as they can be. These are the ones being chastised in Matthew 25. In the Kingdom of God we are obliged to take risks or we will be cast out.

### *Bildung*<sup>ii</sup> and self-formation

Once, talent came to mean 'natural capacities' in the fifteenth century, the concept was taken up by philosophers and theologians. In the twentieth century, one of these was Hans-Georg Gadamer. In *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1989) Gadamer discusses the idea of *bildung*. *Bildung* according to Gadamer is the *concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation* (Gadamer 1989, p9). It is the 'properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities' (Gadamer 1989, p10). *Bildung* is an inelegant word in English but an elegant idea. For Gadamer it is one of the guiding concepts of humanism.

The notion of *Bildung* begins in medieval mysticism, Gadamer says, and by the eighteenth century it means "the properly human way of developing one's talents and capacities" (Gadamer 1989, p10), which Kant goes on to see as an act of freedom by the acting subject. For Kant this is one of a person's duties towards themselves. Kant bases his ethics on our *duties*. Hegel uses *bildung* as Kant does but, as Gadamer notes, Wilhelm von Humboldt, not being a Kantian, pushes it further. After von Humboldt *bildung* evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which each of us carries in our soul the image of God, after whom we are fashioned, and which we must each cultivate in ourselves (Gadamer 1989, p11).

Gadamer lived in Germany from 1900 until 2002. He lived through the First and Second World Wars and the growth of Nazism in the 1930s. He was used to barbarism. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer discusses 'humanism' in such terms that we have to constantly subdue the animality from which we stem, especially the barbaric forms it can take. We have to be vigilant. We can contain our tendency towards barbarism only by a process of education and formation. There are some models for this but no scientific rules. Martin Heidegger, Gadamer's teacher, rejected humanism altogether. He thought it contributed to Nazism. Gadamer too was against the kinds of humanism, especially those stemming from Kant that claimed there were scientific rules to determine what humans should be like. For Gadamer true humanism is "rather an unending quest for civility in human affairs that can only be achieved or exercised in the process of culture and the cultivation of one's own talents" (Hahn 1997, p9).

L. E. Hahn (1997), in the *Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* notes that Gadamer's humanism has its origins in the Renaissance, and the biblical notion that humans are created in God's image (Hahn 1997, p9-10). The way we live up to our parentage, that is as children of God, is to let our talents flourish and so to become ever closer to God. Our dignity comes from our being in God's image. That is why, when he speaks of humanism in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1989,p9 and following) Gadamer begins with *bildung* which has its theological origins in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

Gadamer notes that the Latin for *bildung* is *formatio* and the English is 'formation'. 'Formation' is often a word loaded with ambiguity for older Catholics. In a pre Vatican II Church it often went in tandem with 'training' as in 'Christian Brothers' Training College'. 'Training colleges' were also called 'houses of formation'.

In the hands of enlightened formation staff and teacher trainers 'formation' and 'training' often meant 'developing one's natural talents and capacities'. Formation then meant 'cultivating in yourself the image of God in which you are fashioned.'

But not all formers and trainers were enlightened. Some of the training of young priests, brothers and sisters in those days might have been designed by Cinderella's ugly sister. Cinderella went to the ball in a pumpkin coach and the prince fell in love with her but she had to flee at midnight, leaving her glass slipper on the step as she ran. The day after the ball he sent his servants to find the girl who had won his heart, by trying her slipper on all the young women they could find. When the palace flunkies came to Cinderella's house her wicked sibling insisted on trying on the slipper. It did not fit her foot, so she cut off her big toe. Then it fitted. Arguably, it was too often like that with the training of young Catholic religious. If you did not fit into the habit they cut bits off. Then you did.

People formed in this 'one size suits all' way then went into Catholic schools as teachers and too often they applied the same logic. Hence the ambivalent, even angry, feelings among some older Catholics. Some older Catholics detest the word formation. Some of formation's victims felt they were forced to be something they were not and some were damaged by this process.

Another word that evokes ambivalent feelings in some older Catholics is 'vocation'. In Catholic terminology 'developing one's natural talents and capacities' combined with 'cultivating in yourself the image of God in which you are fashioned' might be described as 'following your vocation'. Vocation in this sense means living the life to which you are called. But 'vocation' like 'formation' was at times objectified by Catholics so that some roles in the Church were called 'a vocation'.

This objectification led to a calling to the priesthood or religious life being called 'a vocation' while other ways of being Christian were not. They were simply examples of 'living in the world'.

Once the idea of vocation was objectified, the thought of a template against which everyone would be measured became a logical next step. Often it stopped individuals developing their talents and cultivating in themselves the image of God that God had placed there. Of course, in this objectification of 'vocation' and 'formation' anything outside Christianity was not even considered. That God might be calling folk to be Buddhists, Jews or Muslims, or even Protestants was beyond imagining.

Gadamer claims that *bildung* is a better word than 'formation' because in the German it has a mysterious ambiguity; it contains in it both *nachbild*, which means image or copy, and *vorbild*, model. This mysterious ambiguity stops the word becoming objectified. *Bildung* is not achieved by technical construction. We cannot have a template with which we force all to comply; *bildung* is a constant and continuous process that goes on all our lives. *Bildung* has no goals outside itself. It does not lead to the use of templates because the template for a human life does not exist (Gadamer 1989, p16). Humanity is not something humans have, or a skill we can learn and retain, once and for all. It is a direction we attempt to follow and something we try to cultivate (Hahn 1997, p10).

It is this mysterious ambiguity that makes Gadamer's discussion of *bildung* important. Restoring the mysterious ambiguity is necessary if we are to talk of formation because the social conditions that allowed the objectification of formation and vocation in the past no longer exist. Students will not accept such an approach and teachers cannot impose it. And, hopefully those whose task it is to form the young no longer have such an objective view. There is also the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 to take into account. There, Jesus condemns those who fritter or throw away their chance to be as fully human as they can. The condemnation surely also applies to those who on purpose or through ignorance or neglect stop the young from developing their talents.

Here Hannah Arendt can help because like Gadamer she says there is no template for being human, or none that we can see as we cannot stand outside ourselves. Like Gadamer, Arendt presumes that we all live in some kind of plurality in which everyone is unique but in which, if we are to flourish, we need community based on symbolic relationships.

### **The human condition**

In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt says that the human condition is one of plurality, symbolic relationships and renewal through the birth of new generations.

We are plural because while we are all equally human it is “in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt 1958, p8). This plurality is the basic condition of both communication and speech. If we were not equal we could not understand each other, hear those who came before, plan for the future, or educate our young. If we were not distinct we would not need speech, action or education (Arendt 1958, p175-6). Amoebas do not need to talk to each other.

Arendt notes that one of the tasks of education is to connect the perspectives of social participants who inevitably view the world from different standpoints. We need to form a relationship or an ‘intersubjective ground’ between us. Paul VI said largely the same thing when he noted that human progress is ‘nothing other than the chronicle of the results obtained by dialogue with other people, with the environment, with the people who have come before us, and in a sense, with those who will come after us’ (Hebblethwaite 1993, p6). Through the construction of this ‘intersubjective ground’, we overcome the problems of plurality without abolishing the reality of individual perspectives or the mysterious ambiguity of *bildung* (Young 1990, p27).

It is in these relationships between individuals that revelation occurs. The revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others, neither for nor against, in sheer human togetherness (Arendt 1958 p180). This is the process of humans revealing their unique personal identities and thus ‘making their appearance in the human world’ (Arendt 1958, p179).

This can be done only when we acknowledge that the web of significant relationships, which gives our lives meaning is made up of essentially symbolic relationships, sustained through physical media (Arendt 1958, p183-4). They are not physical relationships as such, and are not in any sense absolute. The web of significant relationships that constitutes a community exists only in its actualization. When the power that holds a community together is not actualized the community will collapse because power cannot be stored for emergencies. Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company. That is, where words still disclose realities and deeds continue to establish relations and create new realities (Arendt 1958, p200). Communities perish where words are used to veil intentions and deeds are used to violate and destroy. Power springs up between us only at the moment we act together, and it dissipates the moment we disperse (Arendt 1958, p200).

We construct relationships as ‘symbolic participants with our own subjectivity’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). That is, to have a true community the individuals have to be free to agree and to disagree. That we can speak and listen and agree or disagree is an assumption of reciprocity, of equal subjectivity, which keeps alive the radical possibility of equality between human beings.

The necessity for speech in the building of relationships is such that we can never be content with the silence of others. We cannot interpret the other’s silence as agreement (Arendt 1958, p198-9). We need to know that they accept us, that they have heard. We need dialogue to reduce plurality by negotiating meaning. Dialogue is about the alignment of meaning; then it is reflective so that we can formulate the meaning of the *rest* of the dialogue.

Having overcome the problems of plurality by establishing symbolic relationships through dialogue we find in the fact of each new generation of individuals the constant reminder that there is the possibility of new symbolic forms, of new and unanticipated ways of life (Arendt 1958, p247). Here we have set up an educational form of the hermeneutic circle.

As Arendt says, the fact of new generations being born is the miracle that saves the world. These new generations are the milieu in which we educators spend our lives. It is an occasion of both hope and joy that should force us to be open to change. We are reminded every time we go to work, that human affairs will not grind to a halt when we die; the educational enterprise will not finish with us (Arendt 1958, p274). This applies just as much to religious education as it does to any other educational enterprise. The *frisson* for those of us forming young Catholics is that we cannot know what they will create, or what God will create in them and so we cannot tell, except within certain limits, what the Catholicism of the future will be like.

### **The limits of ambiguity**

There are limits, of course, to mysterious ambiguity because, aware of the danger of unchecked innovative potential as we are, we have developed protective institutions like schools, churches and rules about interpretation to manage it. We need protection against fragmentation and degenerative change (Young 1990, p27). We need protection against ourselves so we set boundaries to change. Here authority and fixed texts play a positive role. This is especially so in areas where purely human invention reaches its limit.

Arendt explains this by distinguishing between ‘the human condition’ and ‘human nature’. She says that humans can answer the question, ‘Who am I?’ easily, by saying, ‘I am a human, whatever that may be’ (Arendt 1958, p11). Of course it takes each of us our whole life to know what this means. That is what *bildung* is about.

But the question, ‘*What* am I? Do I have a nature or essence?’ is outside our ken. Quoting St Augustine she concludes that only God can answer that. The ‘question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer’ (Arendt 1958, p11). For believers, revelation explains what we are. This explanation sets limits. Even those who do not believe in God, let alone revelation usually believe there are limits to what we can answer to

the question, 'What am I?' Montesquieu argues for liberalism but with a hard core of principles (James 2007, p502). The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz says, 'The scriptures constitute the common good of believers, agnostics and atheists (James 2007, p486). David Tracy, who does believe in God, makes the point that interpreters, even in a time when interpretation itself is in crisis, have to keep returning to the classics (Tracy 1986, p7). These are the traditions that are *there*; they have formed us. In this sense all humans are born with a long memory.

The urgency, whether we are believers or not, is to find new ways of interpreting ourselves and our traditions, to be open to change and to sort out what are the traditions that constitute our relatively fixed point (Tracy 1986 p8).

For this we need imagination. Erin White notes that this is a critical concept for Paul Ricoeur for whom all the classics of a culture are addressed to the *imagination*. The task of the imagination is to invite the reader or listener to consider new possibilities:

It is in imagination that the new being is formed in me. Note that I said imagination and not will. This is because the power of letting oneself be grasped by new possibilities precedes the power of deciding and choosing (White 1986, p275).

Ricoeur asks the rhetorical question:

Do we not too often think that a decision is demanded of us when perhaps what is first required is to let a field of previously unconsidered possibilities appear to us? (cited in White 1986, p275)

This insight of Ricoeur's addresses the notion that the meaning making that is religious education is an appeal to the imagination rather than a matter of doing as we are told; or in Austin Farrer's words, 'religion is more like response to a friend than it is like obedience to an expert' (Farrer 1964). Hannah Arendt adds, 'It is an appeal to action not behavior'. It is a matter of seeking human freedom to become who we are called to be and we can do this only by continually trying to understand better who we are called to be (Kelly 1998, p28). Religious education is a quest for human freedom and is a never-ending process. But it is first a matter of being grasped by new possibilities.

Linking this back to doing as we are told, human freedom is a matter of coming to know and do God's will. But no existing human structure can be definitive in terms of the will of God. No authority, vocation, church, or institution. All we can do is to continually work at interpreting and constructing cultures that embody fully, respect for all human persons and for the whole of creation. In this sense humans create God's will (Kelly 1998, p29).

I noted above that we need still points; but not too still. Over-managing creative potential is as threatening to true formation as the risk of letting it run unchecked. We are potentially a self-forming species. But we are prone to objectify our own creations and to regard them as natural and unchangeable aspects of the human condition (Young 1990, p27). That is one of the mistakes of conservative hermeneutics. Arendt calls it erecting a 'man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature' (Arendt 1958, p139).

It is what leads some educators to objectify learning in such a way as to cut off creativity and is the basis of a traditional education such as occurs in education by objectives. In most approaches to religious education the tendency to objectify our own creations has extra force as these human creations are claimed to be creations of God, thus they are sacrosanct and untouchable. Such an objectification results from a positivist approach to the text whether it is 'the scriptures' or 'tradition'.

### **The chance to say no**

However, it is risky to honor human freedom and the vocation of the individual. It presumes the right, the necessity for some, of rejecting or accepting only in a modified version, the traditions of the community. The hearer must have the right to say, 'No!' It also presumes that local communities have the need to be different. In so far as the problems local people have are *local*, while the whole Church community's stories and beliefs are more general or shared, there is not only a right but a necessity sometimes for the local community to say 'No!' or 'Not like that!'

Both the desire to transmit the tradition and the acknowledgement of individual choice take place with the presumption that tradition is not an object passed on as it is. It is an ever-changing living subject, and not only does tradition change but we change too (Kelly 1998, p25). So objectives in education, even in religious education are at best tentative. Knowing the endpoint of the educational process is impossible. All education has to maintain that mysterious ambiguity that stops the word becoming objectified.

Education is a matter of creating the present while acknowledging that this means recreating the past. It also has a future component. Anything that forecloses on the future, that has an absolutist set of objectives, cannot be educational because such objectives of their nature attempt to preclude change and preclude creation.

Education, of its nature cannot be anything else but oriented to change because it is first intergenerational and then communicative and it takes place in a world that is unfinished. 'We are participants in an unfinished Church not observers of a finished Church,' to slightly alter John Dewey. Similarly, the English theologian Nicholas Lash comments about the Church, 'Its history still has some way to go' (Kelly 1998, p33).

## Plurality

Plurality in a general sense means the acceptance of diversity. *Bildung* presumes plurality because it has no template for human life and it allows individuals to develop their talents. Current religious educators in Australia need to presume that religious education takes place in a plurality. It does not take place in a monoculture where it is thought that 'reality' comes without quotation marks (Tracy 1986, p47). Pluralism acknowledges the social nature of all understanding and that all interpretation has many possibilities and so ends in diversity (Tracy 1986, p51).

This is important for Catholic religious education because not only is there pluralism in the broader Australian society, there is also pluralism within Catholicism. Of course this pluralism in the Church is a *bounded* pluralism. While every interpretation differs because of the local context, the prior and accompanying texts of the culture and the individual or community doing the interpreting, the dictionary or level one meanings of words place limits on what can be interpreted from them. Defensible interpretations are limited to a group of 'family resemblances', otherwise people could never pragmatically co-ordinate cultures and form relatively peaceful human societies.

## Living tactfully

Tolerance, pluralism and freedom are necessary to Christian humanism. Some boundary is necessary for this humanism to be part of religious education. Not all interpretations are defensible if religious education is to remain Catholic. Religious education, because it has some answers that seem to explain what humans are, has to resist the temptation to intolerance, to stifling all doubt, and to refusing to listen to those who disagree. We are all called to develop our talents and warned we will be thrown out into the dark if we do not.

These are some general principles for more fully human behaviour and for sound religious education in schools. Gadamer points out we need to go further in our quest for self-formation, education, or cultivation. We need to exercise *tact*. He defines this as "the special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice" (Gadamer 1989 p16). Tact is essentially tacit and unformulable. Like *bildung* living tactfully is a life's work.

Tact often involves passing over something and leaving it unsaid. We notice that the other person has a wooden leg for example and we do not draw attention to it:

But to pass over something does not mean to avert one's gaze from it, but to keep an eye on it in such a way that rather than knock into it, one slips by it. Thus tact helps one to preserve distance. It avoids the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the person (Gadamer 1989, p16).

Gadamer, quoting Helmholtz says that while tact is a matter of manners and customs it is considerably more. Tact is not simply a feeling and unconscious, 'it is a mode of knowing and a mode of being' (Gadamer 1989, p16). We need to have a sense of the aesthetic and the historical or acquire it if we are to have real tact (Gadamer 1989, p17). It is a way of life not something we can turn on and turn off. Clive James notes that tolerance is all very well, but it can be withdrawn (James 2007). Tact, as Gadamer is using it, cannot be withdrawn because it is a way of life that one can choose to live. It is a case of:

Keeping oneself open to what is other – to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality. To distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way others see them (Gadamer 1989, p17).

## Conclusion

The careful servant in Matthew 25:14-30 is condemned to outer darkness because he was afraid. He hid his talent in the ground and did not even gain bank interest. He was placed in a situation of mysterious ambiguity where his knowledge from general principles did not suffice. When he had to think for himself he lacked courage and imagination. He had nothing useful to contribute and his choice led to his destruction. Teachers of religious education are working in a milieu that is similar to that of the parable. The human condition is one of plurality and mysterious ambiguity where knowledge from general principles is not always enough. Gadamer proffers a way to be imaginative in an ambiguous and plural world, or at least to avoid making a mess entirely and ending up out in the dark. He suggests that we live a life of *bildung*, and especially, that we develop a tactful approach to life. The tactful person is open to what is other, has a sense of proportion and distance in relation to the self, and so rises above the self to look at the universe in the way others see it. The details of this approach are left to each of us to discover.

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## Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> The task of the imagination is to invite the reader or listener to consider new possibilities:

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Paul Ricoeur in White p275.

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Tolerance is the act of enduring with patience or impunity, of allowing a range of variation. Tolerance is one of the signs of civilised living, a hallmark along with pluralism and freedom of a liberal democracy.

Tact: The special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice'. It is essentially tacit and unformulable; living tactfully is a life's work.

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ii *Bildung*: the 'properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities'. *Bildung* is the concept of self-formation, education, or cultivation (Gadamer p9).

*Bildung* evokes the ancient mystical tradition according to which each of us carries in our soul the image of God, after whom we are fashioned, and which we must each cultivate in ourselves (Gadamer p11). *Bildung* is a better word than 'formation' because in the German it has a mysterious ambiguity; it contains in it both *nachbild*, which means image or copy, and *vorbild*, model. This mysterious ambiguity stops the word becoming objectified.

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