Religious education in transition

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Religious Education in Transition

Parents and teachers today often differ in their views of religion and religious education. Harvard Professor Kohlberg's model of the stages of moral development helps show how the differences originate

During the past decade Catholic parents have become increasingly disturbed at the changes that have taken place in religious education. Anyone familiar with the turmoil and confusion that for some time has existed among Catholic religious educators could hardly blame these parents. Much of the confusion has been based on rapid shifts in content or methodology, frequently only partially understood by the teachers and consequently even more confusedly explained to parents. Parents (and many priests and religious with them) cannot understand why the religious education today's students receive is so different from their own religious training.

Though techniques and varying emphases in content continue to cause problems, it is becoming more apparent that contrasting views of religion and religious education are at the heart of the present difficulties. I would like to explore briefly some ways of analyzing this underlying conflict.

No one would deny that the Catholic Church is in transition from a rather static, well-defined organizational state with a clear sense of identity and shared vision to something that is new and different and at the moment not clearly defined. To be a Catholic formerly meant that a person had definite, precisely stated beliefs, that he followed a well-articulated and rather specific moral code, that his religiosity could be measured by his fidelity to prescribed Catholic practices. There were procedures for controlling any changes that might have taken place within the Church and an equally effective set of defenses for preventing or invalidating challenges from without.

Religious education in such a system was a rather clear task—clear to both parents and teachers. The students would be expected to emerge from their training with a minimum level of information and understanding and some experience in living the obligations that defined a "practicing Catholic." The dispute over whether the Catholic educational effort produced a child-centered Church seems to miss the point, because in the Church as it existed the necessary training for Catholic adult living could be and was given in childhood and adolescence. Just as priests before 1960 emerged from seminaries possessed of a once-and-for-all complete body of knowledge and felt little need for further or continuing education, so the graduate of the Catholic school was thought to have a sufficient grasp of the content and life style expected of a Catholic. And both schools and seminaries were probably accurate in assessing their function within the Church; for the demands of an organization that was as stable as the Catholic Church of those days were far less varied and confusing and novel than those that face us today.

What is clear now is that a new organizational reality, a new Church, is emerging that will have a very different atmosphere and will attempt to restate and recreate Christian values in a less rigid and more dynamic way. At the moment there is within the Catholic Church a wide spectrum of beliefs and life styles, some so different that it would be difficult not to consider them as contradictory. The Church is in the process of becoming in reality a new organization, deriving its dynamism from the key Christian insights and values, but articulating these insights and establishing an identity in a way that will emphasize newness rather than continuity.

In this process, many of those who identified themselves with the more static Church will perhaps never completely understand or be fully at home in the new reality. The Church will move ahead; in all but a formal sense, they will remain behind, faithful to their vision but increasingly out of sympathy with the Church developing around them.

Margaret Mead has described a similiar situation occurring in society at large in her comments on the relationship of the older and younger generations to the contemporary and emerging world. She argues that today's older generation can be likened to the 19th-century immigrants to the New World who existed in a world that they did not completely understand. Their children, more open to

the assumptions and atmosphere of American culture, could in a much more real sense become citizens of the New World. They were able to experience and absorb and develop a sympathy for forces that their parents only partially understood. So, too, in the Church. For many it will remain what it was. And though they may adapt themselves to its new forms of expression, these adaptations will not disturb what is basically a conventional view of the Church.

In the sphere of religious education this same group finds it difficult to understand why their children are not being trained the way they were, with strong doses of religious doctrine and discipline. They do not understand why many religious educators are convinced that the old style training could not be a less effective way to initiate people into the emerging Church, a Church that will be based primarily on free, adult response rather than a basically conventional transmission of a religious tradition from generation to generation. As a result, many parents are out of sympathy with a religious education that neglects the tried and true religious training of their experience. They do not comprehend vague statements about inculcating in the young the attitudes that will both allow and encourage them to continue becoming Christians throughout their lifetimes.

These parents observe their children emerging from religious education without an interest in or a reverence for many of the elements of faith that they had absorbed and made a functioning part of the way they viewed the world. They do not see their children being exercised in the practice of their religion and its obligations in the same disciplined and highly structured way that they experienced as students. These parents are disturbed when they do not observe the school environment reflecting high expectations concerning their children's faithful adherence to Christian belief and practice, where, for example, students are required to participate in regularly scheduled liturgical events that would presume and support Christian commitment. They envision such omissions as having serious consequences for the faith of their children.

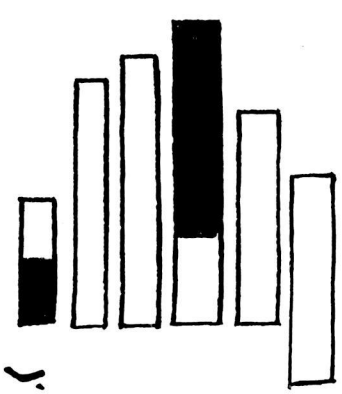
On the other hand, many teachers realize that because of the uncertain future into which they are sending their students, education must be concerned with a functional moral and religious literacy that can adapt itself to new situations and problems. They interpret their task as helping their students to think in a manner that will allow them to discover their own answers to questions rather than encouraging them to accept ready-made answers.

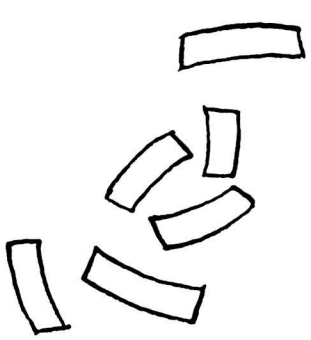
Teachers are aware that in their lifetimes today's students will be called upon to face and resolve personal and societal dilemmas whose outlines are at the moment only barely visible on the horizon. Consequently they are concerned with process rather than content, with the future rather than the present, with the ability to grow rather than the faithful approximation of a conventional model of Christian behavior.

They see the ideal religious education being conducted in an atmosphere that would encourage or ratify personal decisions and commitments for or against the Christian life style, insisting only that it be an informed choice and that in the educational process the students have a serious opportunity to observe and reflect on Christianity as a valid option. This is not to say that the Christian backgrounds of the students or the strong influence of familial religious values would be ignored. For a large number of students a continuous natural development of their understanding and expression of their Christian commitment will take place. For many others, this process may not be as easy or as clear. Christianity is at its heart a freely chosen commitment, and it is incumbent on the Christian school to reflect and encourage this freedom by providing an atmosphere that is minimally coercive, that refuses to reserve its approval or rewards only for those who conform to the Christian option.

The contrast between these two points of view might be illustrated by applying them to the process of moral development. Lawrence Kohlberg, of Harvard University, has evolved a model of the stages of moral development that, he maintains, describes the sequence through which moral development invariably progresses. The first two stages are characteristic of children and focus on punishment and reward (Stage 1) and on a self-centered use of other people (Stage 2). Stage 3 focuses on the search to maintain expectations and win approval of one's immediate group. Stage 4 is characterized by an orientation to authority, law and obligation and to the maintenance of a fixed order. The fifth stage reflects a social contract orientation with an emphasis on equality and mutual obligation in a democratic order. The morality of individual principles of conscience that have logical comprehensiveness and universality is the essence of Stage 6.

Applying Kohlberg's moral development theory to Catholic religious training, I think that it is fair to say that Catholic moral education of the past was aimed at Stage 4 moral development—producing Catholics who were oriented toward obedience and





authority, law and duty, and to maintaining a rather specific and fixed moral code. The religious training of most Catholic parents whose children are currently attending Catholic schools or religious instruction was aimed for the most part at producing Stage 4 Christians. (It might also be remarked that the training and formation efforts in religious orders was aimed at producing Stage 4 religious and that the dissatisfaction of many religious with current formation efforts parallels the uneasiness of parents with current trends in religious education.)

Today the moral training approach being suggested or implemented by many Catholic educators focuses on the development—ultimately—of Stage 6 Catholics, who freely choose Christian values as the comprehensive guiding principles of their moral lives and who are able to apply these internalized values to the variety of moral dilemmas that do or will face them.

It is not difficult to understand the conflict that arises when parents, who have been schooled to interpret their Christian obligations as obeying Church rules and prescriptions, see their children being urged to develop a more personal and internalized sense of Christian values, capable of flexible rather than formal and rigid application to the circumstances of life. For many parents this may seem to be the disintegration of Catholic moral values; for those urging this course, it seems rather to be the proper approach to developing a mature Christian conscience capable of dealing with the challenges of the future.

In any organization, original insights become systematized and fixed. Procedures and expectations that were meant to protect and promote these values, with changing times, become the focus of controversy and conflict. There are some who see them as obstacles to organizational goals rather than means to achieve them. When their number becomes large enough to challenge the *status quo*, the organization enters into a transitional stage where quite different views of the organization begin to develop and cause friction and polarization.

Catholic religious education is a victim of this transitional era. It has been the point of this brief article to explore some of the underlying forces and viewpoints that are causing much of the confusion and conflict that surround religious education efforts.

It is inevitable that when an organization finds itself in the middle of transition and controversy, one of the chief points of confusion and crisis will be the process of training and initiating new members. If the organization is to survive the trauma of transition to a new form, its efforts at educating its future members must undergo an equally dramatic reorientation. Whether the changes being suggested by many religious educators are an accurate prediction of the future is uncertain. What is certain is that the religious education of the past, geared to an organizational reality that no longer exists, does not possess the openness and flexibility to produce Catholics capable of creating the Church of the future.

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