Chapter 16

Understanding Religion and Being Religious

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Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Proverbs 4:7
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I WISH TO DESCRIBE in this essay the most fundamental distinction within the meaning of "religious education." The distinction is often implied in discussions of this topic; but unless the distinction is articulated, then religious education is weakened, both theoretically and practically. No doubt there are other ways to formulate the distinction. Nonetheless, the nature of religious education and the world we live in require some such distinction.

Religious education is composed of two sharply contrasting processes: (1) teaching people religion and (2) teaching people to be religious in a particular way. It should be first noted that both processes are described as "teaching people." The agent of the teaching is not necessarily an individual person called "the teacher." In fact, every individual who teaches is within a (human) community and a (non-human) environment that are the ultimate source of the teaching. Today's educational writing paradoxically tends to undervalue or even disparage teaching. Such an attitude would be suicidal in religion; all the major religions give special status and honor to teaching.

The second thing to note is that the distinction relies upon a difference in connotation between the noun "religion" and the adjective "religious." There is an ambiguity built into the modern use of the word "religion" and its cognates. On the one hand, "religion" functions as an area of scholarly interest; religion stands next to economics, mathematics or psychology as a subject taught in school. On the other hand, religion is also the general name for a set of particular practices that a Roman Catholic, a Buddhist or a Muslim performs.

An individual person does not practice religion, that is, a generality; one can be "religious" only in a particular way. The adjective captures this particularity better than does the noun. In contrast, the religion that is studied and taught in classrooms is necessarily abstract and plural. To understand religion is always to step back and compare religion with religion (even if the comparing is of two versions of the same religion).

This ambiguity in the meaning of "religion" can obviously be a source of confusion. When people fight over "religion in the public school," are they referring to a prayer service or to academic instruction? The first has no legal or academic standing; the second is urgently needed in public schools. But we cannot get intelligent debate on the issue while the two meanings are confused. Although the confusion is unfortunate, the ambiguity can be an advantage. The two processes described as "teaching people religion" and "teaching people to be religious in a particular way" have an inner connection. They are not simply parallel processes to be engaged by disparate populations. For an individual, one or the other process may take precedence at a particular moment of life. But to distinguish is not to separate; we distinguish in order to unite in a more careful and intelligent way.
The Two Aims

In the process of teaching people religion, the aim is "to understand." Other physical and social activities are bracketed while one asks such questions as the following: What is going on here? Why do these people act this way? How have things changed over time? How does this activity compare to the activity of other groups? The student of religion focuses on observation of data, audio or visual records, books and essays. This is the underlying question: Can I grasp with some logic the human experiences grouped under the term "religion?"

For an understanding of religion, a person need not participate in any particular religious way. However, it is very difficult to see how one can understand a phenomenon unless one has some feel for it. Especially in regard to religion, the most inner of experiences, one has to know at least what it would be like to be a practitioner of a particular religious way.

In the other process, the aim of teaching is "being religious in a particular way." that is, observant Jew, devout Catholic, practicing Muslim. The teacher (community and environment) teaches people to pray before explaining what prayer is. The teacher demands obedience to the moral path before ethical systems are explained. The word "before" implies that such explanations will be forthcoming, but the degree of explaining varies greatly. Throughout most of history, people have often attained only a limited understanding of their own religion.

Here is the crucial change in the modern world that presses the issue of "understanding" on increasing numbers of ordinary people. Many Christians and Jews daily encounter the challenge of modern studies. The Roman Catholic Church is perhaps the most interesting case study in the world because a constraint upon questioning was suddenly overthrown as a result of Vatican II. The immediate effect has likely been a decrease in the devoutness of Catholics, together with an increase in skepticism - not at all what the fathers of the council intended. But to the extent that understanding is also on the increase, there is hope that the ground is being laid for a flowering of a healthier piety and greater devotion.

The great test for Catholic Church leaders is whether they are ready to risk the spread of understanding. At this moment of history, it is not sufficient to provide an understanding of Catholic theology. There is a need to understand religion. The two are, of course, compatible; but when the context is the understanding of religion, then a whole barrage of questions and issues arises that is not "askable" within Catholic theology. The question may be not the meaning of a text in Matthew but why a New Testament, not whether the bishop should be obeyed but whether "God" is a meaningful term; not the ordination of women but whether religion is inherently sexist. These are
not unusual questions; any educated person is likely to have such thoughts at the edge of consciousness.

In trying to get an understanding of religion, a double conversation is needed: the dialogue between religions and the dialogue of religion(s) with secular life. Each of these dialogues admits of a great range in the explicitness and depth of the comparing. For example, to understand Christianity implies a background understanding of Judaism. The engagement with Judaism can be a casual reference to the Jewish meaning of faith, messiah and kingdom, or Jewish voices can be admitted into the discussion of Christianity. Similarly, every attempt to apply Christian morality implies a non-Christian morality which can be put down or seriously considered.

Classrooms

Where does such understanding of religion occur? It can happen anywhere, but the place that is deliberately established for this process is the classroom. A space and time is set aside for a group of people who wish to understand some “subject matter.” A language that is disciplined and tolerant carries the inquiry to a deeper level than is usually possible outside the classroom. Schools do other things, particularly with younger children. Schools cannot avoid “socializing” children into some way of life. The classroom as a zone of free inquiry thus stands in tension not only with society but even with the school that houses it.

The principle of academic inquiry varies according to the age of students. Our society recognizes and accepts “critical thinking” in university classrooms. But every classroom has to have an atmosphere of respect for the play of the mind. No subject matter and no question can be proscribed. An honest class room discussion - one that does not presume an answer to be inculcated - can be dangerous. To search for the meaning of suicide, drugs or sexual behaviors should be done with full awareness of the life-and-death importance of classrooms.

Teaching people religion is an activity thrown back almost entirely on religious institutions. That is too heavy a burden, but church or synagogue has to do the best it can. The Catholic Church supports schools where some excellent teaching of religion occurs. Many writers on education assume, without examining any evidence, that teachers of religion in Catholic schools merely proselytize and indoctrinate. In my experience, there is more indoctrinating going on in civics and social studies classes than in Catholic school religion courses.

Parishes

The parish is supposed to be a place to teach people to be religious in a Catholic way. The parish has to make an effort to teach people religion, but not at the expense of the
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religious education that is appropriate for it, namely, a liturgical life for its members and moral engagement with the non-church world. The parish's concern for teaching people religion might be channeled into providing books, sponsoring a few serious discussions and working with other church units to influence public policy on the teaching of religion.

The parish is not the sole agency for teaching people to be religious in a Catholic way. It remains the most visible organizational form for Catholics. However, a more radical reform of church organization may eventually be necessary. Most parishes simply cannot be "a community," although some parishes are umbrellas for several kinds of community and communal expression. What emerges as new church forms ought to come from educative communities and not bureaucratic convenience. While it is true that "the church" educates to be religious in a Christian way, the requirements of education should help specify the meaning of "the church." This principle is not a capitulation to the secular world; on the contrary, it is a resistance to the modern corporate model by returning to the early church's development of communal forms in response to the proclamation of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The center of teaching people to be religious in a Christian way is the liturgical community (not necessarily today's parochial form). From common worship and contemplative prayer flows the energies for protest in the name of justice. The experience of prayer and the overflow into moral engagement with today's world is what forms the person as Christian. Obviously, there is no age limit in this experience. It can begin at birth, although it will lack a high degree of particularity in childhood. The child cannot grasp the distinctions of Christian doctrines; he or she can grasp that a Christian particularity is important to his or her parents and other trusted adults. During a lengthy period - ranging perhaps from ages 5 or 6 to 16 or 21 - understanding religion is likely to take precedence over "being religious." The modern world teaches, if not skepticism, at least a demand for empirical and logical evidence. For a while, it may seem that "being religious" has been undermined; and for some people, the quest for understanding seems permanently to triumph. For many other people, however, the question of childhood slowly returns, now disciplined by the transition of adolescence and young adulthood. The question is again one of being religious, but it is now possible to invent a way of life with greater intellectual understanding and free choice - greater particularity - than was possible in childhood. What most people need is supportive friends, occasional discussions and sustaining rituals at life's crucial moments.

The whole of religious education is not a terribly complex project. It requires that those of us who appropriate the term "teacher" know which of the two processes we are engaged in at a particular time and place. The tragedy would be that, for lack of
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clarity about this distinction, institutions end up doing neither: their academic inquiry is not challenging enough and their formation is not particular enough. Endless talk about Christianity is not religious education. What deserves that title is teaching people religion with all the breadth and depth of intellectual excitement one is capable of - and teaching people to be religious with all the particularity of the verbal and non-verbal symbols that place us on the way.