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Religious Education and the Public Sphere

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At first glance, Bono, Breda O'Brien, Seán Healy and Brigid Reynolds may seem unlikely bedfellows, but one thing that they all have in common is that they bring faith to life. To be more specific, they bring faith into the public sphere, into the public dimensions of people's lives together. They express the social implications of Christian faith in persuasive, varied, and imaginative ways. At a recent Prayer Breakfast with George Bush and many leading politicians in Washington, Bono argued for justice for people who are poor, dying and excluded from the means to live life with dignity; each week in *The Irish Times* Breda O'Brien lifts up issues of the day and looks at them through a Christian lens; Seán Healy and Brigid Reynolds engage with the State and wider society on issues of economic and social justice from a Christian values perspective. The Church needs people who will articulate persuasively the economic, political, social, and cultural implications of Christian faith in the public sphere. This ability to bring faith to life in the public sphere is critical in Ireland today.

There was a time in Ireland when the Church was almost synonymous with the public sphere. It encompassed the public and at times seemed to encroach on the workings of the State as well. Due to the prevalence of the Catholic Church in all aspects of society, there was little need for people to articulate their faith in public ways. The public was already culturally infused with many aspects of the Catholic faith. However, today the Church is not one and the same as the public, nor does it infringe improperly on the workings of the State. It is developing a new identity as Irish society is changing. In one way, it is similar to the GAA, IBEC or ICTU. It is an organization that contributes to the formation of the life and identity of its members and Irish society, just as other organizations do. Its voice is no longer privileged over the many others. Its power now comes from the integrity of its practice, the telling of its stories, and the persuasiveness of its vision.

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Ireland is slowly developing into a multicultural and pluralistic country. This has implications for religious education that are pressing and urgent. Since Christian faith is no longer taken for granted, no longer normative, nor part and parcel of everyday culture, it will require deliberate and mindful appropriation. Quite simply, people need to be intentional about learning from the Christian faith and living a Christian way of life. Given the new context, this learning will require a capacity to enter into conversation with others who may or may not share something of the same tradition.

Christians will meet more and more people who do not share their basic world view or if they do, may not share the sources of such a belief. They will meet Muslims, and atheists, agnostics and Jews and people who are spiritual without being religious. There are a number of responses to this emerging situation. If Christians are unable to engage in conversation with others who articulate different values, they may be tempted to retreat from the discussion and retire to the private domain of their lives. Or, they might be tempted to make generalized statements about the dignity of people and the reign of God but be without the capacity to translate that into everyday life. Or, given the shameful history of child sexual abuse and lack of moral standing of the Catholic Church in Ireland today, another response is simply to remain silent for fear of accusations and recrimination. Others might stay silent because they are embarrassed about the hegemonic claims of the Church over its history about truth and, given a new appreciation for the value of tolerance and the belief that everyone has their own truth, think it best to keep their beliefs to themselves in case of causing offence. I think we can do better than any of the above responses. We can bring Christian faith to our lives (and our lives to our faith) and find imaginative and persuasive ways to bring it into the public sphere, allowing it to shape public issues and opinion. In order to do this well, religious education needs to become more mindful of the public dimension of Christian faith and educate deliberately to help participants find ways to bring their faith into the public sphere.

It is a poor reflection on our religious education systems if Christians find themselves marginalized by default, without the ability to translate the tradition and communicate it across difference, according to the mode of the receiver. The Churches need to reflect on their ability to 'mobilize the critical potential' within their own traditions in the face of what dehumanizes the person, harms our planet, diminishes the quality of our connectedness, and hinders the flourishing of all. Christians today must make a contribution from a faith perspective to living public life in

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responsible and life-giving ways for all. Bringing faith to life in a pluralistic and emerging multicultural society will require something new of religious education (also true for theological education). It will require forming people for a new context, one in which the ability to engage in sustained, critical conversation with diverse others about the faith and life in the public sphere is of paramount importance.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere is a metaphor that helps us think about how information and ideas circulate in society. Jürgen Habermas suggests that there is a 'domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens ... deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion ... [to] express and publicize their views.' It is where we find out what is going on in our communities and what economic, political, social and cultural issues are facing us. It is where people participate in these issues, adding their voices and helping to reach a consensus or compromise about what should be done in any given situation. The public sphere is privileged through all sorts of media outlets, the internet, blogs, and institutions and organizations that contribute to public opinion. These include the Churches, unions, media owners, business, sports organizations, fashion industry, community organizations, NGOs, the State, the arts, entertainment industry and individual citizens.

Clearly there are many different voices in the public sphere, expressing different opinions and values about our identity and history, what we should prioritize, and how we should live together in humanly satisfying ways. These many different voices can leave us feeling that the public sphere has become down-market, distracted by trivia, and focused on what is entertaining, too fragmented, without enough rational debate about 'serious' issues, contributing to a population that has become apathetic and disengaged from real politics. While this may be partly true, it represents too much of a caricature to appreciate the complexity of the public sphere. There are positives in the multiplicity of voices in the public sphere. We now know about 'private' matters that were excluded in the past. Since the 1970s feminists have made a convincing argument that the personal is also political. Up to this point, the public sphere was characterized by information and opinion of interest to Irish, white, Catholic, heterosexual, formally educated males. Issues of concern to women were confined to the private and domestic domains of life.

However, over the years and with much effort, women managed to bring their reality into the public sphere. Issues such as work in

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and out of the home, domestic violence, sexuality and child rearing have all become of concern to the public at large, influencing the culture and the law of the land.

Just as the private can shape the public, the public can also influence the private. Aristotle pointed this out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* some twenty-five hundred years ago. He saw that brave people were found where bravery was honoured. When the Greeks were at war, they needed people who were willing to fight. To recruit the soldiers, they built statues to their brave heroes, and they told stories of their great deeds. Children grew up influenced by these people. The same is true for other things, such as compassion or telling the truth. These are found where they are honoured. We are all the time influenced by the stories around us. Given this profound and persistent influence, we need to ask questions such as: what are the stories in Ireland today that are honoured, what do they lead to, who is telling them and why are people listening to them? Key for religious educators, is how to tell the Christian story in the public sphere, who is telling it there today or are we just telling it to ourselves, how are the great stories of our faith being told and/or translated so that others can come to see for themselves their significance for life for all?

Walter Brueggemann talks about the need for Christians to become bilingual. On the one hand, we need to have the language of our own community. We need to be able to share liturgy, scriptures and traditions with one another. But on the other, we also need to be able to talk with people outside of our group from our own religious identity. For this, translation is necessary. Religious education need to help participants become bi-lingual so they can make sense of Christian faith in dialogue with others who are agnostic, atheist, Muslim or Jew. In Ireland today – where 167 languages spoken – being bi-lingual in matters of faith is more than ever a necessity. There may also be a need for translation in order to speak to people within one's own community, perhaps to speak to people who are no longer practising their faith and have drifted away from the institutional Church. Without this ability, Christian communities will slip to the margins of society, talk amongst themselves, and become sectarian oddities with no influence in any of the Irish public spheres.

POSTMODERNITY

In Ireland today, there is not simply one 'public' characterized by a rational and logical discourse in one language. Many 'publics' have emerged due to the diversity within our society. These different publics have specific needs, and articulate them in different ways. Travellers have become quite visible in the public sphere,

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seeking recognition as a distinct ethnic group. Gay and lesbian organizations are looking for legislative change around civil unions, as well as a shift in Irish culture around issues of identity and respect. A vast array of peoples from all over the world are seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Two pubs have recently emerged in Ireland for the growing Polish community. This new found diversity was reflected in a Festival of Peoples service held on the Feast of the Epiphany 2006 in Dublin's Pro-Cathedral. It was a celebration of difference. More than ever, we are now faced with the 'other' right here in our midst.

This postmodern trend, the emergence of diversity, and a new proximity to the 'other' provide great opportunities and challenges to religious educators. Roberto Goizueta suggests that postmodernity can be described as the West's increasing consciousness of the 'inherently ambiguous character of human history'. Up to this point, the crucified of the world were invisible and unheard by most of us. This is not the case anymore. We see and hear what is happening in places such as Darfur and Iraq, the negative dimensions of globalization, poverty and exploitation, and the impact of HIV/AIDS particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. We are less confident in the modern notion of the person as an autonomous agent and subject who believes in the inevitable progress of history. We are suspicious of the view that knowledge is inherently good and always objective. And we have begun to resist unified, all-encompassing, and universally-valued explanations for things.

Some postmodern thinkers such as Foucault have rejected over-arching descriptions of history, under the theme of progress and liberation, because they are simply justifications for the *status quo* as the 'inevitable outworking' of the past. The new emergence of people who are marginalized and excluded has revealed the underbelly of the modern project. The positive over-arching descriptions of history have not taken these people into consideration. Postmoderns have provided a necessary corrective to this situation, placing more emphasis on the local and the particular.

It is in the local that we meet the 'other'. This is not just a casual chat with a woman from Nigeria in Tesco, although this is a start. Emanuel Levinas, the French philosopher, wants such a meeting with the 'other' to pull us off centre. We should not presume to meet the familiar in the 'other' but someone who is genuinely strange and different. It should pull us out of our usual way of seeing the world and ourselves. This encounter should set us back, pull us up short, confront us with what is very different and challenge us to see things in a new and more humane way. It

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should undermine the assumptions we make easily about other people, about who they are, and what they want. For Levinas, the face of the other summons us and takes us hostage. It addresses us and demands an ethical response, nothing less. It requires us to try to see them as they are, 'other' and not the same as us. This encounter is a radical call to responsibility to the face in front of me. According to Levinas, it is not possible to look into the face of the other and do them violence.

When we really see the face of the other in front of us, our knowledge shifts from knowing 'about them' at a safe distance, a distance that serves to sustain the *status quo*, to one that really tries to see them in all their difference and dissimilarity. However, this seeing is bi-directional. Rather than simply seeing them in their difference, we too allow ourselves to be seen, our assumptions to be questioned, and our very selves to be shaken. This kind of relationship allows for the possibility of an ethical dimension to emerge. We might ask ourselves about the relationship between my/our comfortable lives and the lack of resources for others throughout the world. Levinas wants us to see the world in a new way, to be drawn into a new-found sense of responsibility for how things are now. Even though we may not intend any of the harm in the world, we need to realize that there is an inevitable relationship between the 'other' and 'us'.

THE FACE OF THE OTHER

The new proximity of the face of the other raises a deep consciousness of that relationship with the 'other' and it needs to be kept in mind when we are educating people to bring their faith into the public sphere. It is in the public sphere that people will encounter the 'other', who are different and from a different place. This postmodern sensibility to the 'other' has deep roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Although Christian faith is brought into the public sphere to tell its stories, question and persuade, we must be open to hearing the stories of others, questioned and persuaded ourselves. It is essential to be open to conversion through the face of the 'other'. The process is not about making quick, clean forays into the public sphere and returning unscathed with the goods, such as some new piece of legislation, funding, or policy initiative. Bringing faith to life in the public sphere is about developing a stance and posture that is sustained and open, informed and persuasive, confident but most of all characterized by love.

Within this new postmodern sensibility, there is a keen awareness of the importance of community. The person is not some sort of stand-alone individual but needs to be understood as a 'person-

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in-communities'. All the time we belong to many different groups. These groups shape our identity, our values, and perspectives. The great diversity in many of these groups gives rise to many new points of view on things. Making sense of these differing perspectives requires interpretation and a realization that we all see from somewhere in particular, and that we only ever see partially. We are not objective and dispassionate observers of the world around us. We cannot get outside of our context and view our structuring of the world from some neutral and unbiased place. And so today, engagement with different publics needs to be characterized by conversation. It is through sustained, critical conversation that interpretations, even of Christian faith, can be tested and tried out in different public spheres. We need to ask: do these interpretations make sense; are they true and trustworthy; what are the unseen consequences of them; are some interpretations privileged over others; why is this the case and how can other voices be heard? This sort of engagement is very difficult.

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The purpose of Christian religious education is to promote a lived and living Christian faith towards God's reign in the lives of participants and communities. Jesus' own life purpose was the reign of God. This faith requires a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ, and requires the whole of the person, their very being. It shapes their identity and agency in the world and has cognitive (head), affective (heart), and behavioural (hands) dimensions. All of which goes to say that Christian faith in the service of God's reign reaches into every pore of one's life, shaping how we live and engage with the world around us.

The shaping of the ultimate myths of meaning and ethic by which people live their lives is politically significant. The word 'political' is taken from the Greek, *politike*, meaning the art of enabling the shared life of citizens on how to live responsibly together. The different ways that people interpret both their external and internal worlds will determine how they live together. Christian religious education involves shaping how people make sense of, relate to, and engage in the world. It influences how and what people see around them and, at the same time, how they allow themselves to be seen by the world. The focus of Christian faith is that 'people are to effect in history the values of God's reign of justice, peace and freedom, wholeness and fullness of life for all.' This cannot be confined to the private dimension of our lives; it is an invitation to humbly participate in every arena of life on behalf of God's dream for the whole of creation.

Consequently, Christian religious education is not only to serve

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as an 'intra-ecclesial agency' but must work to shape the values of society and how people live well together. Thomas Groome in his book, *Sharing Faith*, claims that a 'shared praxis' approach is one way to educate for this new context. Praxis is a technical term that basically refers to 'purposeful human activity that holds in dialectical unity both theory and practice, critical reflection and historical engagement'. It aims for a way of being-in-communities that is active, reflective, and creative. The word 'shared' highlights that this reflective and purposeful activity is characterized by partnership, participation and dialogue, reflecting the social nature of the person. Groome says that 'shared praxis' engages and nurtures the socializing role of the faith community. It sets up a dialectic between participants and their contexts, both social and ecclesial, and also between the Christian faith community and its own socio-cultural situation.

Shared praxis encourages participants and communities to reflect critically on life in all its dimensions, through the medium of Christian faith. This very dynamic makes it capable of 'shaping people's politics as much as their prayers.' I agree with Groome that such a process can indeed help participants to become more public about their faith. However, I also believe that there are a number of considerations about using his shared praxis approach that need to be borne in mind in order to bring faith to life in the public sphere. In what follows I focus on the earlier movements in the shared praxis approach.

SHARED PRACTICE

Shared praxis is characterized by a number of movements. It is important to articulate them clearly as they will otherwise be open to confusion and multiple meanings in the rest of this article. They are:

- (a) *engagement*: creating personal interest and activity engaging participants;
- (b) *expression*: inviting people to be attentive to and express – somehow – their present practice around a theme of life or faith or both;
- (c) *reflection*: encouraging people to think for themselves – personally and socially – to question and probe, to reason, remember, and imagine around present praxis;
- (d) *access*: enabling or lending people 'ready access' to story and vision of the Christian faith;
- (e) *appropriation*: encouraging participants to integrate life and faith, to 'see for themselves' to 'make the faith their own';
- (f) *decision*: inviting decision-making – cognitive, affective or behavioural, personal or communal, etc., – to bring faith to life.

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Although this approach and the movements might seem a little abstract when read in such a list, closer attention will reveal that these movements are something very natural and a process that we follow often in our day-to-day relationships. A couple of examples might help. I recently got a phone call from a friend who was very upset (movement a – there was an engagement and interest between us). I asked him what had happened (movement b – inviting him to express his present practice). He proceeded to tell me about being called up in front of the dean for plagiarizing in his last essay. When he had finished talking, I asked him a number of questions about what had happened, how and why he had done it, what were the likely consequences (movement c – questioning and probing on present practice). He knew he had done something wrong and dishonest (movement d – this was not an explicitly Christian faith statement, but a raising up of an ethical dimension, a wisdom he had learned over the years). But he was under a great deal of pressure at the time and wondered about the level of his own responsibility (movement e – here he was in conversation with the ethical tradition he was aware of and sought to make it his own). Finally, we spoke about what now and what he was going to do about it (movement f – the decision and ‘so what’ dimension of the process). Clearly there is not any great boundary between these movements and some will blur into the other.

Another example could involve a proposal for a Travellers’ halting site for your parish. How might a shared praxis approach help there? Clearly there will be quite a lot of interest in this proposal by the local community, including the Travellers, who might already be a part of the local community (movement a). Those who decide to use this process will then need to state their own positions, experiences, attitudes, perspectives and sentiments on this proposal (movement b). The facilitator can then probe a little deeper and prompt the group to further critical reflection on their experience and perspectives, remembering the sources and contexts that have shaped their views (both of the settled and Traveller communities). The group will also need to look carefully at the proposal and get all the facts and evidence of good practice from elsewhere. They need to put this development into the wider context of relations between the settled and Traveller communities. Often, given the lack of reliable knowledge of the Traveller community by the settled population, some sort of work might need to be done on informing the participants about Travellers and their particular identity and history. Finally, the participants will need to inform themselves about the overall proposal, size, management, cost, etc. (movement c). The next movement requires some explicit attention to the beliefs, values, and

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ethics suggested by Christian faith as pertinent to the issue (movement d). These then need to be brought into conversation with participant's own experience, weighed against their judgement and perspectives. Hopefully this movement will shift beyond the 'informational' and cognitive dimension that was required of the earlier movements, to a more 'formational' or 'transformational' dimension that takes account of participants desires and affectivity (movement e).

Finally, after such weighing of the issue, the participants need to come to some decision about the issue, which might entail further planning, action, and reflection (movement f).

Shared praxis is a process and a paradigm that has been immensely successful all over the world in religiously educating towards a wisdom for life lived in Christian faith. It has been used to good effect in other disciplines as well. However, for it to help participants to bring their faith into the public sphere, we need to pay greater attention to the earlier movements of 'expression' and 'reflection'. These are the movements when the participants identify something from their own life experience to bring into conversation with Christian faith. However, if the life experience of participants is not sufficiently thought through and critically reflected upon, the movement will result in in a 'thin' description, characterized more by anecdote than analysis. When 'thin' descriptions are brought into conversation with Christian faith they inevitably lead to 'thin' responses that are more appropriate to the personal and private dimensions of one's life. In this sort of situation, many of the participants may have quite a good understanding of the Christian faith in itself, 'knowing about' the Trinity, Incarnation and Grace. But when these good understandings of faith are brought into conversation with only 'thin' understandings of life, the approach inevitably becomes lopsided and skewed towards the private and personal.

'KNOW YOUR PLACE'

For shared praxis to help participants become more aware and engaged in the public dimensions of life and faith the process must attend more to the movements of 'expression' and 'reflection.' There is much in *Sharing Faith* that is helpful here. Groome points out that the religious educator needs to help participants to gain insight into their entire way of being a 'person-in-communities'; it is essential to develop people's consciousness of where and among whom they have been socialized. This consciousness can contribute to a deeper understanding of who they are, what they do, and what they might become. The phrase 'know your place' is often used as a sort of put down, directed to someone

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who is perceived to step outside their context and the elaborate systems of legitimation that operate in society. However, it is important for religious educators to help all to 'know their place' in a positive sense. Our place includes relationships, gender, history, ethnic group, class, sexual orientation, etc. It conditions one's being and knowing. It is the location from which one sees and makes sense of the world. Place shapes identity and values, ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. People are never merely observers of their place in communities or the world, they are embedded in them. The same holds for the public sphere. There is no such thing as being truly objective or neutral when engaged in discussion in the public sphere.

Along with awakening to their 'place', participants in religious education need to reflect critically on their present reality in a systematic manner. This includes economics, politics, relationships, and culture. According to Groome, without such a reflection there will not be 'a dialectic of sufficient quality to promote the ongoing conversion of participants, the reformation of the Church, and the transformation of society.' In order to get an appreciation of what is going on in their own lives and the world around them, Groome suggests that participants must bring three dimensions of themselves to self consciously bear on their place. Participants need to engage in (a) analytical and social remembering, an uncovering of the historical influences that shape their lives today; (b) there must be a cultural and social reasoning, which question and interpret the structures, values and meaning around which society organizes itself, (c) finally and critically, there must be creative and social imagining, which sees both the consequences and the responsibilities of actions and in addition questions what people can do to live together in more equitable and loving ways.

Were this sort of reflection to be done at the beginning of the 'shared praxis' approach, the participants would have an enlarged sense of the world, a better understanding of why things are the way they are, and how they might be in the future. They would move beyond the personal anecdote to a more 'thick' robust description of life. When this is brought into conversation with Christian faith, and decisions are made as a consequence, it seems more likely that participants will see a place for their faith in the public sphere.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

In this article, I have argued that the emerging pluralism and multiculturalism in Ireland requires something new from religious education. Along with participants being educated in the public significance of Christian faith, they also need to learn 'how to'

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engage in the public sphere in persuasive, conversational and imaginative ways. Groome's shared praxis approach is helpful here but careful attention needs to be given to the earlier movements, otherwise the resulting engagement in the public sphere will be shallow and superficial. A healthy Irish society needs a vibrant and participative public sphere. Religious education can contribute to this by facilitating the active participation of many voices from within the Christian tradition. This aim needs to shape and run through the entire religious education curriculum. If it does this, then religious education will provide an essential service to both Church and society.

The meaning of our city. If the church exists for any earthly function, it is to provide and to sustain community. Over seventy years ago, T. S. Eliot saw the vast, terrifying and apocalyptic vacuum at the heart of modern urban living without God. Since his time, little has changed for the better, and much for the worse. We indeed need to ask – as Eliot bids us in one of his choruses from 'The Rock' – whether, when his 'stranger' asks us what the meaning of our city may be, we huddle closer together because we genuinely love one another as community, or whether the unpalatable truth is rather that 'we all dwell together to make money from each other'.

—+RICHARD CLARKE, *A Whisper of God* (Dublin: The Columba Press) p. 81