

## **“Religious Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”**

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Submitted by Kathleen O’Gorman, Ed.D.  
Loyola University  
New Orleans, Louisiana

The title of this reflection frames its intent to distinguish the mission and practice of religious education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from that which is needed and demanded in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Once again we find ourselves between the times, reeling in the fallout from yet another paradigm shift that requires a reinterpretation of everything in its wake. The particular task, addressed in this paper, is to take a long, hard look at the big picture that has opened up for us at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that we might wisely and faithfully discern the role we must play in the unfolding story in which we find ourselves. How appropriate and perhaps ironic to give ourselves to such a consideration on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of REA.

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Awakening**

“It’s a Small World After All!” “We Are the World!” These popular songs reflected and expressed a worldview that emerged in the U. S. around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each celebrated human diversity. Each manifested a paradigm shift that prompted the human community to overcome the illusory, arbitrary, and divisive boundaries of nationalism and racism. Each articulated a realistic hope that the human community could work out its problems if it would, in John Lennon’s words, “Come Together.” The cultural revolution cresting in the 60s rallied the sentiments of grassroots citizens to a newfound appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity and a goal of international unity. Whatever the inspiration or impetus, 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans awakened to a deepened and compelling realization that we lived in a global village as a single human family.

Decades before Michael Jackson’s artistic initiative to end world hunger and the Disney theme park proclaimed and celebrated cultural diversity, such a vision of our social relatedness and

human interdependence had been anticipated through the establishment of the United Nations. By mid-century social scientists, philosophers, politicians, and the news media had joined the chorus, referring to the “world” (read “human community”) as a global village. Such organizations as the Peace Corps, Save the Children, and Bread for the World sprung up and attracted the nation’s youth to work toward the alleviation of human suffering around the world. Near century’s end, Hillary Clinton would write a best seller that emphasized the community’s role in the nurture and education of our children. Never before had this country reflected such dedication to the pursuit of harmonious international expanding relations, the cultivation of an appreciation for cultural diversity, and a deeper realization of our social ties and responsibilities. It seems appropriate then to suggest that 20<sup>th</sup> century America discovered the wisdom of anthropology.

Less obviously but no less significantly, the scientific community had been exploring our human relationship with the larger, older world that was all but ignored by the more self-referent human community. While western societies were working out the demands and responsibilities of being world citizens, scientists were discovering a far more comprehensive and no less intimate world, a world more immediate with a prior status and determining influence. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, the scientific community experienced its own perspective transformation, a perspective in which our newfound appreciation for the small world of human relations was reduced to the size of a flea on the back of an elephant. Through the explorations and discoveries of the scientific community into the more expansive world of outer space as well as the deeper world of inner space, a specialized privileged few of us awakened to the realization that humans are part of, that we live in a universe. This might be regarded as the truly “Great Awakening” of science, an awakening of the universe itself.

Aided by sophisticated technological instruments that extended the capacities of the human eye and ear to probe the far reaches of space and time, 20<sup>th</sup> century science probed the mysteries of the universe, the Earth, and the life community, from its macrosphere grandeur to its finest microsphere detail. Through the powerful lens of the Hubble Space telescope the human eye probed the far reaches of space and time, looking back into time and out into space to its beginning point as a singularity some 14 billion years ago. From this originating event, scientists uncovered the story of the universe unfolding in a series of transformation episodes. These natural world explorers learned that the expanding universe has brought forth billions of galaxies like our own Milky Way galaxy and that there are billions of galaxies so far away from us that it takes years for their light to become visible to those earthlings endowed with the gift of sight. So too did the human community acquire access to a more informed understanding of our membership in a family of planets, orbiting a medium-size star, our sun, one of billions of stars. As these discoveries found their way into the grassroots context their implications began to stir in the minds and hearts of those who paid attention to them. Hearts were touched as well by images of Earth from space, evoking a deepened appreciation for the unique, life-generating and life-supporting nature of our planetary home in this solar system.

As powerful as 20<sup>th</sup> century telescopes, microscopes opened up the vast world of inner space. Scientists working at this end of the spectrum discovered that even this inner space is far from small. Indeed it abounds with the same rich mix of subatomic and microscopic structure and

activity. Whether the focus of inquiry was geology, geography, biology, botany, zoology, or chemistry, the cell, atom, or quark, the discoveries of the microscopic world revealed a correspondence with macrophase discoveries, indicating a unity and continuity in the evolutionary process.

Those who gave themselves to learning about the planet pieced together its story and structure as astronomers and astrophysicists were probing the same secrets of the universe. As our earlier continental ancestors had understood intuitively, scientists in both contexts acquired empirical verification that everything is related, connected, inter-dependent; everything has a common origin. By mid century it had become clear to those who chose to look that we live in an evolutionary universe, that makes possible an evolutionary planet, that makes possible an evolutionary life process, that brings forth planets, pigs, petunias, and people. In a word, humanity had achieved a vision of life that revealed the continuity between the emergence of the universe, the emergence of life on Earth, and our own emergence as a species within the life community. The theory of evolution grew most compelling as an explanation of such continuity. And while a growing number embraced it, many resisted, preferring more mythological interpretations such as the Genesis creation story. Perhaps this resistance arose in part from the mechanistic gloss that characterized the articulation of the theory, an articulation that overlooked or could not appreciate, much less communicate the deeper meaning and significance of its subject.

Regardless, by century's end nightly news reports brought us visions and stories of far away lands and introduced us to new cultures and people along with inspiring images and stories of the natural world from the vast vistas of "outer space" to the solar system to our home planet with all its diverse life forms. The lens of science had dramatically expanded and extended our perspective, both spatially and temporally, offering us a new set of coordinates to inform our interpretations of the past and in the present. Those who took these discoveries seriously, humbled and awed by their implications, began to appreciate the extent to which our human "global village" owes its own emergence and sustenance to this prior originating context which ordered and organized the prerequisites for the emergence of a planetary life system that is unique as far as we know at present.

### **Religious Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

As these expansive perspectives seeped into our consciousness, our social traditions and institutions were challenged to adapt to their implications. The emergence of the field of religious education might well be identified as a poster child of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born of the multicultural and multi-religious sensitivity that had set up a United Nations and organized a World Council of Churches, the Religious Education Association sought to bring diverse institutions and perspectives into an integral partnership for the common good. Its mission was expressed as an effort to establish a dialectical relationship between religion and culture and between these social structures and education. Committed to the ideal of a critical-appreciative collaboration, the REA crafted a mission statement that remains as relevant and challenging today as it did at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

To inspire the educational forces of our country with the religious ideal; to inspire the religious forces of our country with the educational ideal; and to keep before the public mind the ideal of Religious Education, and the sense of its need and value.<sup>i</sup>

Such a mission acknowledged and embraced the public role of religion and education if the goal of *e pluribus unum* would be achieved. It likewise assumed that both religion and education could adopt the appropriate way of carrying out such a mission. The religious ideal in this case presumed an engaged and transcendent theological orientation and a collaborative interfaith effort that would offer the social order the resources of the established traditions. This brings to mind Gabriel Moran's prophetic re-articulation of this same ideal, that "the aim of religious education is greater appreciation of one's own religious life and less misunderstanding of other peoples."<sup>ii</sup> It also brings to mind the awakening that inspired the emergence of a Parliament of World Religions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religion awakened to the global village.

The educational ideal as interpreted by the REA, steeped in an optimistic confidence of the salvific effects of its reformed, progressive expression, would supply the dialectic that prompted critical thinking and the appropriation of religious wisdom. So too education would facilitate the process of interpreting the various religious traditions to make their practical wisdom available to the larger, diversified community. As is often the case, the record and the rhetoric failed to correspond and neither side of the equation held to its idealistic promise. The educational ideal abandoned the religious tradition substituting in its place the political ideal. Those assuming responsibility to promote the religious ideal seemed to develop cold feet in embracing the educational vision and gradually withdrew from their public commitment to focus instead on their internal matters and function. As it became increasingly identified with the religious agenda, those representing the tradition of education withdrew.

Over time the organization aligned itself more and more with religious traditions and institutions, supporting their efforts to educate their members in their distinctive particularities. The interest in teaching about religion (that is to teach the wisdom of each religion) was supplanted by each religion's commitment to teach its own tradition to its particular religious community. In a word, teaching "about" religion was abandoned and replaced by teaching "our" religion. By the end of the century the religious ideal had lost much of its credibility and influence within the increasingly pluralistic socio-cultural context. Cut off from the tempering wisdom and dialectical discipline of the educational ideal, its intentions and practices came to be viewed by many as irrelevant, naïve, even self-serving rather than as an integral component of community life. Ironically and tragically, the world of Religious Education had shrunk smaller than the multicultural, pluralistic world celebrated in the Disney theme park.

### **The Dark Side of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The compromised ideal of the REA was a mere shadow of the larger and more ominous failure of the global village to work out its life in peace and productivity. Perhaps no generation had a more expansive and compelling vision of human community; perhaps none experienced greater suffering and tragedy, both on a larger scale than any previous generation.

The dark side of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included the devastation of the natural world as well. We have yet to fully assess the impact of the bombs on the larger life community, the land, plants, water, birds and wildlife. Not to mention the effect on the more comprehensive life systems. Nor have we adequately assessed the destructive effects of those “domestic bombs” dropped by our plundering industrial economy. As scientists and those committed to the observation and conservation of nature were uncovering and discovering ever more unexpected and fascinating mysteries within the Earth community, marveling at the delicate balance through which life emerges and flourishes, those attracted to its commercial value seized the opportunity to amass power and riches by colonizing and exploiting what had been discovered. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and extending throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, entrepreneurial industrialists grasped these new opportunities, setting out to exploit the planet and its life treasures for monetary profit. Oil, trees, farm fields, birds, cows, rivers, flowers, iron ore, mountains, valleys, horses, oceans and seas – every life form except the human (we might say, human like ourselves) was regarded as “natural resource.” In the commercial, industrial view that was growing by leaps and bounds, the world of nature was valued in terms of its productivity and capacity to generate a profit. Once the commercial world had seized this irresistible opportunity, everything, every being other than human in the natural world became fair game, exploitable, objectified. Nothing was safe; nothing sacred.

Such a response received ample philosophical rationalization for its justification. Classical Greek and Roman humanistic traditions and in their later Enlightenment expression had asserted the primacy and superiority of humans over other life forms. Theology supplied the spiritual or religious rationale for human dominance of the Creation, arguing that humans alone were made in the image of God. The notion of stewardship further justified the role humans were given by their Creator to rule over and in the satisfaction of our needs and desires. No question about it. Such a right to dominate and help ourselves to the riches of Creation traced back to the Greeks as well as the Garden.

The commercial industrialist enterprise increasingly looked to the scientific community to advance its self-interests and pursuits. While some scientists committed themselves to the discovery and understanding of the natural world, others were attracted to the applications of their expertise in more secularized commercial and industrial contexts. In such ways science facilitated, if not contributed directly to the burgeoning, consuming industrial-technological monster whose feeding habits spun out of control and whose appetite grew insatiable. Thus the scientific achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be regarded as a mixed blessing at best, perhaps a curse. The accomplishment that had enabled the human community to learn so much about the natural world that had brought us forth and set us in paradise, had, however unintentionally, provided the means that enabled us to destroy so much of it. Scientist-philosophers like Gregory Bateson would attribute such pathological behavior to our having driven God from the garden.<sup>iii</sup>

As fervently as industrialists exploited the planet for wealth and power, a community of concern and protest arose and grew in intensity during the latter half of the century. Movements to establish civil rights and anti war protests mounted; Rachel Carson wrote her prophetic book, Silent Spring<sup>iv</sup> and the first Earth Day was celebrated around the country. The environmental movement emerged out of the grassroots and grew steadily in its numbers and influence.

Ecological concerns and perspectives were integrated into school curricula and cultural artifacts as social consciousness of its fragility and limits and the toll human ignorance and greed on the life community deepened and spread. By the end of the century the ecology issue became a priority in the nation's political agenda and groups lobbied the government to commitment itself to the alleviation of the abuse humans were inflicting on the life community. Thus we might say that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we awakened to the realization that we lived on a unique, fragile, and life-bearing planet called Earth and that our presence constituted had become a menacing threat to its capacity to function in the future as it had for some 4.5 billion years.

### **Religious Education Caught Between the Times**

Here at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neither the vision of a viable global human community nor a viable earth community seems realistic or achievable. Human relations are more strained and frayed than ever; human-earth relations seem beyond repair. The divide between science in service to the natural world and science in service to the corporate world is becoming wider and deeper and harder to bridge. Having barely begun to resolve our inter-human tensions and difficulties, we are presented with the challenge to work out our relations with the other life forms and with the planet itself. Having barely begun to understand the origin, structure, and dynamics of the universe, we are caught short and embarrassed when our children, in their innocent, matter of fact way, relate to us the latest astronomical discoveries and theories.

We have learned more than any other generation about the story of the universe, but many of our institutions and socially-committed human communities seem disinterested or even adverse to reconstructing their traditions and interpretations in response to this new revelation. We have learned more than any earlier generation about the origin and structure of life on Earth, from the appearance and disappearance of the great woolly mammoths and formation of the towering mountain ranges of the Himalayas to the nucleus of the carbon atom and the vast reaches on inner microscopic space, but fail to marvel at the miracle which makes life possible. We have been to the moon and felt its lonely emptiness, but failed to appreciate and celebrate the fecundity of the Amazon rain forest. If earlier peoples had learned what we have been taught in the past hundred years, they would surely have erupted in a delirious celebration, singing, dancing, painting, and relating the stories about these marvels and mysteries until they dropped in exhaustion.

Such is the context in which we find ourselves at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have yet to conclude the work begun in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now we face an even more daunting task—that of reinterpreting and renegotiating our place and role within the context of the universe and the life community of the planet. This involves a thorough examination of our assumptions and belief systems and a reworking of our traditions and life orientations. Our inherited interpretations, founded in an outdated cosmology, ecology, worldview, and self understanding are in dire need of reframing and revision...possibly reinvention.

Thomas Berry maintains that we are in a paradoxical dilemma because our traditions cannot do what needs to be done at this historical juncture. (They were founded in a different

cosmology and responded to a different experience.) But, we cannot do what is needed without them. For they offer us the inner resources and dispositions to do what needs doing.

Most especially our religious and educational institutions, while feeling the effects of 20<sup>th</sup> century human “accomplishment” seem to be at a loss as to how to respond. Perhaps the structural implications of the emergent global village and the discoveries emerging from scientific investigations into the universe and the planet appear to be too overwhelming for institutions of such a conserving nature. On the surface at least they have attempted to respond to the social agenda of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Multicultural sensitivities and initiatives yielded a greater measure of cultural diversity in both religious congregations and their curricula and their classrooms. Their preaching and teaching likewise evidenced an appreciation of the human community’s recognition and commitment to the pluralistic demands and contributions of life within the global village.

Efforts to integrate the goals of religion and education, whether in their dialectic or complementary relationships, admirable and helpful in their motivation and intent, are rendered inadequate in our present day context because they do not assess the primacy and significance of the disciplines in their unique functioning and focus. What is needed is not the partnering advocated by educators like Peter Gilmour in his article “Worlds of Knowledge Within the World of Religious Education: An Interdisciplinary Perspective.”<sup>v</sup> What is needed is a model illustrating the relationships between primary and derivative contexts. Rather than identifying cosmology as **an** important perspective, it would seem that our understanding of the universe would be the primary framework for studying or interpreting any subject other than the universe.<sup>vi</sup> Indeed the universe would always be presented as **the** comprehensive and determining context out of which the others proceed and in light of which they derive their meaning and significance. In other words to partner an understanding of the universe with an understanding of a subset of the universe is comparable to partnering a work of art with an instrument used to create it. Thus in this perspective interdisciplinary education might be considered a step in the right direction, but it needs to be an interdisciplinary education that teaches priorities of reality and value, that does not confuse what is primary from what is derivative.

Despite some efforts to respond to 20<sup>th</sup> century developments, neither religion nor education has demonstrated a readiness to reorder its story or vision. The revolutionizing revelation that history began with a life-brimming explosion some 14 billion years ago, which continues its outpouring into the present, and which has been traced in a sequential pattern of unique, transformative advances, seems to have made little impression or had much influence on either institution. Nor on any other “humanities” disciplines for that matter.

### **Religious Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

I would propose that this constitutes the great challenge and opportunity of the new century -- the great divide that needs to be bridged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thomas Berry has described our options thus: we can choose the Technozoic future, in which we place our faith and devote our energies in technological innovation as a solution to our problems and challenges. This is indeed

the sweeter path for most of us because we don't have to give up anything and the specialist experts will take care of us. (I remember a history professor who said we have never used technologies that humans have invented. A grim forecast indeed.)

The alternative to this path would be the decision to pursue the Ecozoic future, which will require that we experience and embrace a moral conversion from our exploitative lifestyles and solutions to becoming a benign and gracious presence within the life community. This option will make heavy demands on our creativity and generosity, but it will ultimately lead to our liberation and fulfillment. In Berry's view, this is the path to life, to salvation, to a viable future for our children, the children of every living being on our planet. Given its open nature and dialectical approach religious education would seem well disposed by its earlier sense of mission to take the initiative in educating toward an Ecozoic future.

What kind of education will facilitate such a future? What vision will carry us toward a viable future?

My response to the vision question is an affirmation of Maria Montessori's instruction that is found in her book, To Educate the Human Potential,<sup>vii</sup> which seems worthy to quote at length, because it is so rarely cited in educational contexts and has never been more timely or relevant:

Since it has been seen to be necessary to give so much to the child, let us give him a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality, and an answer to all questions...If the idea of the universe be presented to the child in the right way...it will create in him admiration and wonder, a feeling loftier than any interest and more satisfying...his intelligence becomes whole and complete because of the vision of the whole that has been presented to him, and his interest spreads to all, for all are linked and have their place in the universe on which his mind is centered. The stars, earth, stones, life of all kinds form a whole in relation with each other, and so close is this relation that we cannot understand a stone without some understanding of the great sun! No matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.

First published in 1948, how prophetic her insight in light of what science would later discover about our universe! What a responsive and enlightened vision she offers to those who are dispirited and trapped in a coat that has become too small.<sup>viii</sup>

If the vision of the 20<sup>th</sup> century extended the meaning of community from my country or people to all countries and all peoples of the Earth, the 21<sup>st</sup> century vision includes that primary and ultimate context of human existence from which everything emerges and is sustained. This is the great community in which we understand ourselves as related to everything. We are related to stars and seas, plants and trees, the whole of life, every form, through all time. As our continental ancestors realized and celebrated, the whole of creation constitutes "all our relations." Such a vision would permeate all our teaching about the sacred. Our students would be introduced to a sacred world, not in the next life, but in this life. They would be introduced to



every being in the world as a spiritual companion and presence, not just the faith community or even the human community, but the great community of all living beings.

Several years ago I remember attending a chanting ceremony led by visiting Buddhist monks and the monk who introduced the ritual told us that when the monks chant, they are chanting in the company of all **beings**. How striking and instructive those words: “All beings!” Such a vision articulated in such an expansive language for life prompted me to the realization that I had rarely heard or experienced such inclusivity in my own religious contexts and tradition. Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen would have understood and spoken like these monks. They each lived in a universe! So too did Thomas of Aquin live in a universe. In his Summa Theologica<sup>ix</sup>, the great medieval synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, he evidences such a vision. Posing the rhetorical question, ‘why are there so many things?’ he responds,

Because the divine could not image itself forth in any one being, it created the great diversity of beings, so that the perfection lacking to one would be supplied by the others, so that the whole universe together participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being whatever.

Here we are instructed that if we are to understand the Creator we must understand everything the creator made because each being is endowed with a distinctive feature that makes its unique contribution to understanding the one who created it. Aquinas lived in a universe as did many of those who read and appreciated his insight. Indeed the Medieval world itself seems more universe referent than we “moderns” seem to be. And without the empirical data and images we have been given.

Thomas Berry who draws deeply upon Aquinas is wont to say that just as we owe our physical existence to the universe, so too we owe the evocation of our psychic or spiritual capacities to this same universe. To paraphrase his insight we might consider the extent to which the outer world evokes the inner world; that we have such a glorious sense of the divine because we live in a glorious world. How diminished our sense of the sacred, the divine, would become, how shriveled up, were it not for our experience of and awesome outer world, one that speaks to us in so many languages and expressions and reveals such marvels and inspires such awe. He often muses that if we lived on the moon our imaginations (and religious sensibilities?) would reflect the lunar landscape. There would be little to experience, little to learn, so much less to inspire.

Berry also offers us a model for moving toward an expansive and inclusive vision. He proposes three dimensions or mediations of sacred community that need to be brought together if we are to practice an integral spirituality and lifestyle. Affirming a Trinitarian orientation, he identifies these as the Divine (the Creator or Father), the human community (God incarnate), and the integrity of Creation (the indwelling and bonding of Spirit). He is concerned to illustrate through this model a threefold relationship: the first mediation or mode of relationship focuses on the individual and the Creator through which each of us seeks to deepen our personal relationship with God. The second mediation focuses on the correspondence we recognize

between our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. This second mediation, while a central teaching and primary emphasis in our own religious tradition, acquired greater urgency and received more attention in this last century as our world of social relations expanded. What has been less emphasized, even overlooked, Berry claims, is the third mediation that is borne of the recognition that we cannot have integral relations with God and with the human community while we are estranged from the larger life community. He concludes his essay stating, “Fulfillment of this third mediation, the establishment of a harmonious relation between humans and earth may well be the condition for a more effective inter-human mediation and even for a more perfect divine-human mediation.”<sup>x</sup> Another way of stating this is to propose that the word “neighbor” as in “love your neighbor” now extends to all beings in the great community of existence.

Another model that is helpful in mapping out a more inclusive and expansive vision is the “Year of the Family.” I use this to structure the approach I take in every course I teach, no matter what the subject or institutional context. It serves as a conceptual map of the ecology of contexts in which we (and everything in existence) are embedded and related. We will suggest how this model might structure expansive, inclusive religious education curricula when we discuss implementation of an Ecozoic curriculum.

## **Year of the Family** (1994)

(visualize a curved handprinted set of contexts moving in size and scale from the universe up to the top of the page to the smallest family context)

### **Our Family of Birth**

Let us drink deeply of that mysterious mix – Mother, Father, Sister, Brother, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, Grandparents, Great Grandparents, whose traits we share, though we may have never met. We’re linked to them and they to us, the Givens of our lives.

### **Our Soul Family**

Let us cherish the families of our soul -- Friends, Colleagues, Those with whom we’ve searched and loved and fought and prayed, danced and played. They too have shaped our lives. Now we within them dwell and they in us... forever.

### **Our Human Family**

Let us honor our whole human family – such great diversity in race, culture and creed. With each one I share a common origin and destiny. Our loves and fears and dreams at core are shared. No matter how threatened or aloof I feel in the presence of another’s poverty or wealth, color, sex, or health – that one is me! We have all in common bound together in Earth’s one family. For better or for worse. Now and forever.

### **Our Earth Family**

Let us treasure every Toad and Tree, the Waters and Soil and Atmosphere, The Microbes and the Butterflies, The great varieties of Species who are Brother and Sister to us. We bear within our bodies Minerals from Rocks and Water from the Seas, the wisdom of the Worms, all that has gone before. With them we form one intricate, balanced, “close-knit” family of life:  
One Holy Communion.

## **Our Universe Family**

Let us reverence the Universe—our whole, most ancient family. All that is—the Galaxies and Stars, Earth, and You and Me—came forth from one common Source some 15 billion years ago! We now look out into space and time on a starry night and listen. The music of the spheres is singing in our souls! Shall we dance? We too are made from stardust. These stars are us. We are relatives. They know our name. We are family and This is Home!

With regard to the matter of vision, this model illustrates an ever-more-inclusive sense of community, moving from immediate family to the most comprehensive community of the universe. We live in an ecology (oikos) of homes or contexts, considering “home” as a multi-dimensional reality. Each dimension offers us and elicits from us a mode of presence and participation in an ever more elaborated, diverse, and inclusive company of being, one in which every being has a role and a voice and is a manifestation of the divine. Everything is saved or nothing is saved. Everything is revelatory or nothing is revelatory

The vision that will carry us through the problems and demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will also include an expanded and inclusive understanding of history, of story. If the 20<sup>th</sup> century reckoned with the injustices and distortions of patriarchal interpretation of human experience and accomplishment, acknowledging the biases of culture, race, and gender, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will reckon with the anthropocentrism that reduced history to the human story with its glaring reductionistic blind spots. The vision we need will overcome the great divide between the humanities and the sciences, between the human story and the biological story and the geological story and the planet’s story, and the story of the universe. From here on, history will refer to nothing short of the great story.

Religious Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be universe referent, earth referent, and life community referent, or it will fail in functioning as a mediating influence between the world of religion which understands its responsibility to make present the world of the sacred to the human community, which will find alternative points of entry and experience into the realm of the sacred. Its primary responsibility will be to offer the human community the resources of our religious traditions in their developing understanding of the wonders of creation and what they reveal about the creator and how they guide us to live within the life community. Anything less is unacceptable and unfaithful.

### **Educating for an Ecozoic Future: The Story and Vision We Need**

Thomas Groome offers the categories of Story and Vision<sup>xi</sup> to describe two significant dimensions of Christian (and I would propose all) religious education: the emergent process or experience and the overarching paradigm or ideal toward which we strive. I would affirm the

adaptation of these categories in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context, proposing Story as a referent for the “great story” and Vision as a referent for the “great community.”

Whereas Groome’s referent for Story and Vision is the particular meaning ascribed to them in the Christian tradition, what is needed at this time is that the particular be understood in the context of the whole or great story and vision that we have just discovered. Of this story Thomas Berry writes, “A new creation story has evolved in the secular scientific community...this story seems destined to become the universal story taught to every child who receives formal education in its modern form anywhere in the world.”<sup>xii</sup> He goes on to say that it is of utmost importance that our children learn the sacred dimensions and meanings of this story. And if not through religious education how will such awareness be evoked and such meaning imparted?

The vision is that of a sacred world in which a host of diverse life forms and processes interact in reverent and intimate association for the good of the whole. It is “the whole universe together sharing in and manifesting the wonder of the Divine. It is all of creation.

### **Strategies for an Integral Religious Education Practice**

Our teaching would begin by acknowledging these universe coordinates and we would move from the universe to particular contexts and events, always referencing the part to the whole as Maria Montessori emphasized to her student teachers some 75 years ago. This dynamic applies to process as well as to scope or vision.

Obviously we as educators need to learn the story of the universe in as much depth and detail as we can absorb, depending where we are in the process. There are ample resources available for this -- in video/DVD, print, and in the person of a local astrophysicist/astronomer. I have found local experts to be pleasantly surprised to learn their work and knowledge is of interest to professionals in other fields, especially religion.

Focusing on integrating the Story coordinate in practice, we would begin with some form of sharing the great story and perhaps eliciting the particular stories of our students, assisting them to understand their particular stories as elaborations of the story that made the student story possible in the first place. So too we would invite them to tell the particular stories of stars and birds, flowers and trees, the Earth and the moon, as well as share such stories with them. It would seem nowhere more appropriate than in a religious education context to learn and share and reflect on such stories, in their detail and depths of spiritual significance. As an aside I would suggest that it is not the role of the science teacher to offer this depth of meaning; nor would I expect the history teacher to facilitate this awareness. Who more appropriately and competently than a religious educator can mediate such an understanding of story as sacred in all its expressions?

The “Year of the Family” reflection can be used in presenting the great story as sacred story. Each context suggests chapters or developments within the evolutionary story. If, for example, we were educating young children about the meaning of family, we can begin with the universe as our great family (perhaps assisted by some appropriate nursery rhymes), helping them to

appreciate that we are born into a very large home that has lots of space and wonderful furnishings and that we were born into THIS home billions of years ago.<sup>xiii</sup>

Another way of contextualizing a subject in the great story is to lead students in a ritual that has come to be identified as “The Cosmic Walk.” A cord is laid out with stations, usually marked with candles, that represent a sequence of significant events and transformation moments in the great story that are particularly relevant in a given teaching context. There are resources for this walk that have been developed and used as well as resources for assisting an educator select and prepare her own. It is more effective outdoors although it can be adapted to smaller inside spaces easily enough.

I always begin a course or program with some form of contextualization in the universe story. Sometimes it is more elaborate; others it is simply asking students to offer 2 minutes of silent appreciation for everything that has happened, everything it has taken, everything we have been given in order for us to be present in the moment and in the place. We then invite the students to share their thoughts about this and what they have identified. The experience usually ends with my own sharing which gives me an opportunity to teach them more about it. Subsequent meetings or classes might locate the subject in Earth story or any number of stories of the various members of the life community.

Obviously, the vision of history or story that is explored here regards it as sacred through out all of time and in all its detail. History extends throughout all time, no longer the exclusive domain of the human, no longer divided between secular and sacred. The history of salvation is the history of the universe. And we need to teach this in every class, not just in history class.

The vision to guide and inspire us toward an Ecozoic future might reframe the REA mission statement something like this:

To inspire in the human community the universe ideal; to inspire the universe through the living out of the human ideal; to hold before the life community the significance of the universe fulfilled in the human and the human fulfilled in the universe.

For religious education then, the primary challenge and essential task of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is locate our religious education practice in a universe. The vision we need is not the superficial glance with which we scan a newspaper or checklist, rather it is the ability to see in depth, the depths of meaning and mystery that Philip Phenix described in his wonderful book, Education and the Worship of God.<sup>xiv</sup> He distinguishes the sacred as a discrete, particular reality and form from the sacred that is incarnate in every reality and form. For Phenix the sacred is a dimension of depth, of spirit, of soul. Such an understanding is implied in statements such as “all life is sacred” and “the spirit pervades everything.” Religious education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will understand its primary mission to promote an understanding and appreciation of participating in a sacred world, through a sacred process that is our primary sacred community and guide and inspiration.

To paraphrase Thomas Berry, we don’t awaken until we awaken to the universe, our minds to the world of meaning mediated by the universe, our imaginations to the world of beauty

expressed by the universe, our emotions to the world of intimacy that inspires us to appreciate the relational bonds we share with all creation. It takes a universe to educate us so that we come to understand who we are and where we have come from and what we should be about. It takes a universe to fulfill us – our longings and dreams and possibilities. To the extent that the human community can live out of this story and vision, the universe itself will be fulfilled. I cannot propose a more authentic or inspiring mission for religious education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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#### Works Cited

- <sup>i</sup> Quoted from the historical overview panel of the REA brochure.
- <sup>ii</sup> Gabriel Moran, Interplay. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1981, p. 51.
- <sup>iii</sup> Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972, p. 435.
- <sup>iv</sup> Rachel Carson, Silent Spring. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1962.
- <sup>v</sup> Peter Gilmour, "Worlds of Knowledge Within the World of Religious Education: An Interdisciplinary Reality," Listening, XXXX.
- <sup>vi</sup> Here I would reference Thomas Berry's insight, "The universe is the only self-referent context in the phenomenal order; everything else is universe referent."
- <sup>vii</sup> Maria Montessori, To Educate the Human Potential. Oxford: Clio Press Ltd., 1989, p. 5-6.
- <sup>viii</sup> Gerald and Patricia Mische introduce their book, Toward a Human World Order. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1977, with a parable entitled "The Coat That Got Too Small."
- <sup>ix</sup> Summa Theologica. Chapter 1, Question 47, Article 1.
- <sup>x</sup> Thomas Berry, "The Third Mediation," sermon given at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in 1982.
- <sup>xi</sup> Thomas Groome, Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision. 1980. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- <sup>xii</sup> Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988, p. 128.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wonderful resources for this abound. Of these my recommendations are Born With a Bang (2002) and its sequel, From Lava to Life (2003) by Jennifer Morgan (Dawn Publications, P.O. Box 2010, Nevada City, CA95959) and for young children and The Universe Story by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992) for older children and adults.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Philip Phenix, Education and the Worship of God. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966.