

## REVERSING THE FOUNDATIONS

Levinas and Christian Religious Education Practice

Wayne A. Cavalier, O.P., Ph.D.

### Faith in Action

Stephanie was a friendly seventh grader who did not stand out in any other way, although I was to learn that she was unusually courageous or at least more courageous than I could imagine myself being at her age. She had gotten it into her head that it would be a worthwhile thing for her and her classmates in my seventh grade religion class to take a trip to visit a daycare center she knew of through her mother's bus driving. The center cared for severely disabled children. When she approached me with the idea, my first impulse was to protest. I didn't have the time (I meant the inclination) to deal with this.

"What if we take care of all the details?" she suggested, without a hint of incredulity.

I raised up for her all that I thought that would mean, convinced that the reality would cause her to cave. She only responded by giving very sensible thoughts about how they could address all my concerns. It was I who caved. How could I resist? I was their religion teacher. This was one of those truly rare moments of students taking the initiative to do a purely good thing. I was proud of Stephanie, even though I secretly suspected that an agreement on my part would mean that I would end up dealing with lots of loose ends.

The day came. My students had indeed taken care of every detail. They had invited a guest speaker in to talk about what they should expect. They planned activities to do with the children while we were there. They planned refreshments without forgetting any of the necessities. They arranged all the transportation. They secured all the necessary permissions. I was stunned that they remained true to their word. Stephanie made sure of it. Their visit went wonderfully. I couldn't be more proud of them.

This event grew organically out of their religion studies. It was no accident that Stephanie came to me as the spokesperson for her class to raise the possibility of this field trip. It made sense to them and it made sense to me that such an action would be a natural outgrowth of their learning about Catholic Christianity.

Such a concept is taken for granted today, evidenced in what is often called service activities. Many Catholic confirmation programs require students to perform a minimum number of service hours as a prerequisite to confirmation. Catholic high schools often require service hours of their students, even making it a requirement for graduation. Occasionally, these programs include structured reflection on students' experience. However, more often than not, it is simply a matter of doing the hours and getting a signature to verify its completion. What relation there might be to the content of their religious education program remains implicit and assumed.

### Education in Faith

How do theorists and practitioners justify the service expectation in the religious education curriculum? How might they understand this expectation in relation to the rest of the curriculum?

In *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Bryk, et al trace the development of a concern for social justice in Catholic education back to the beginnings of the social teachings of

the Catholic Church. From the Reformation to that time, Catholicism had an other-worldly orientation. Its mission was understood primarily as spiritual. As such, its focus was Avertical, individualistic, and other-worldly.@<sup>1</sup> However, with the writing of *Rerum Novarum* and, later, *Quadragesimo Anno*, that orientation began to shift. This shift achieved fuller treatment at Vatican II, which emphasized the bifocal mission of the Church of building the Kingdom which begins in this world and is brought to completion in the next. Vatican II emphasized the baptismal responsibility of all the faithful to participate in this process as constitutive to their identity as Christians and an essential expression of faith in Jesus Christ. As Bryk and colleagues put it,

The Church articulated peace and social justice as the central concerns in carrying out the life of Christ. Rather than a primary emphasis on the hereafter, the Council emphasized that God was immanent in humankind and revealed through its development. As human society moves inexorably toward the realization of the Kingdom of God, the pursuit of peace and social justice is God=s work on earth.<sup>2</sup>

Consistent with this view, Vatican II articulated a view of Christian education that identified social justice as a vital concern. Thus, in its *Declaration on Christian Education*, the Council charges that the Catholic school

prepares its students to contribute effectively to the welfare of humanity and to work for the extension of the kingdom of God, so that by living an exemplary and apostolic life they may be, as it were, a saving leaven to the community.<sup>3</sup>

From this urging flowed national documents that took up this spirit. In *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the U.S. Bishops describe a three-fold task of Catholic education: to teach the Gospel, to create lived community, and to serve humanity.<sup>4</sup> Soon, these three dimensions were understood as necessary outcomes of education in the faith. This is evident, for example, in the 1986 document, *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis*, which acknowledges that Afaith has affective (trusting), cognitive (believing), and behavioral (doing) dimensions@ and therefore that

---

<sup>1</sup>Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>*Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education, October 28, 1965)*, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), #8.

<sup>3</sup>Bryk, et al, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did, #14*. In the same document, the Bishops state:AMerely >teaching about= religion is not enough. Instead such programs must strive to teach doctrine fully, foster community, and prepare their students for Christian service@ (87) and AFor service is itself an efficacious means of teaching doctrine, and thus these programs should include opportunities for service as part of the educational experience they seek to provide the young@ (89).

Catechesis of the Christian faith must intentionally promote all three dimensions.<sup>5</sup> This document stands on other documents whose vision flows from that of Vatican II.<sup>6</sup> The doing of faith, the document asserts, leads to a deepening of faith. Faith leads to doing and doing leads to renewed faith.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it became axiomatic that religious education must incorporate faith-in-action as both criterion and content for the teaching and learning of Christian faith and the action is understood as action for the sake of justice.

While most religious educators understand that the task cannot be adequately articulated or accomplished today absent of this dimension, there still tends to be dissatisfaction with attempts to carry it out. This is often due to a continuing reliance on a schooling model of religious education. Such a model emphasizes the cognitive dimension of religious education and makes incorporation of the affective and behavioral dimensions most challenging if not impossible. The best often accomplished is the incorporation of the other two dimensions as complements to the main activity of teaching and learning concepts.

### **Praxis Models of Religious Education**

Theories of education that understand the challenge of fully integrating the behavioral dimension of faith, especially faith-that-does-justice, draw their inspiration from Paulo Freire and liberation theology. These theories put into play Marx's insight that learning has not taken place until it is realized in action.<sup>8</sup> This transformation of epistemology puts one's activity in the world center stage, thus allowing these theorists to develop a way of talking about religious education that is constitutive of action on behalf of justice, understood as essential to Christian faith. Based on a praxis epistemology, this approach might be called a praxis model of religious education.

The premise is sound. However, given the underlying ontological foundation of educational theory as practiced and understood in the Western philosophical tradition, this perspective tends to receive only a nod where knowledge will always primarily be understood as something grasped by the subject, as something to be added to the substance of the subject.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, even in the best religious education programs based on a praxis understanding of knowledge, ethical considerations will tend to be secondary to and derivative from knowledge understood as concepts absorbed by the subject, only subsequently impacting action. Therefore,

---

<sup>5</sup>The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith* (1986), #10, subsequently referred to as *Challenge*.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Carole M. Eipers, *Overview of the Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*, in Martin Connell, ed., *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), pp. 448-449.

<sup>7</sup>*Challenge*, #13.

<sup>8</sup>See Daniel S. Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), p. 120; Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 167.

<sup>9</sup>See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics as First Philosophy*, in Seán Hand, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989, reprinted 1998), pp. 76-77.

concepts such as service programs will always remain merely an appendage to the real business of learning concepts in religious education, even if some of those programs are effective in integrating service through theological and critical reflection on the experience. Even programs based on a praxis orientation in knowledge seem to focus on action in a secondary, less central way than they do on the learning of concepts.

### **Challenging Ontological Priority**

Emmanuel Levinas challenges this priority of ontology in Western philosophy. He questions its foundations by upsetting the priority placed on ontology and replacing it with the priority of ethics. The subject cannot exist outside of its primordial encounter with the Other.

In doing this, Levinas further questions epistemology founded on ontology. Knowledge cannot in his system be merely the grasping of concepts by the subject. Knowledge must instead be encountered in the matrix of the encounter with the Other. It is never complete, never giving the subject rest, who is only most truly itself in the knowledge of and response to an ethical imperative which it can never satisfy.<sup>10</sup> The responsibility of the subject is realized in its relation with others.

Coming from the dual perspective of being an early student of Heidegger and Husserl as well as a Jew personally grieved by the Holocaust, Levinas addresses the reality that despite phenomenological theory and the Enlightenment project, human beings clearly are not in a process of ethical progress. The questions he faces as a result of his experience of the Holocaust challenge the very foundation of Western philosophy, based as it is on the priority of Being. Having been exposed to the phenomenological approach to the question of Being, he is moved to ask whether there is a part of reality that is outside of or beyond Being.

Questioning the tendency of phenomenology to absorb all reality into Being, he seeks to identify that which cannot be absorbed, which forever eludes the grasp of Being—the Other which remains always other. He finds the complacency of Being—self-absorbed, content in its own existence, undisturbed by challenges truly outside itself—to be a dangerous motif, given the tendency then of Being to forget that which might disrupt its contentment and self-centeredness. It is the idea that Being evolves in a progressive manner through its own dynamic that is the main concern here. Convinced that such an idea is faulty because of the evidence of history, Levinas insists that Being is not naturally ethical, and must be challenged to face its ethical responsibility. This challenge can only come from outside of Being, from that which is truly other than Being, which has not and cannot ever be absorbed into Being.<sup>11</sup>

What's more, Levinas claims that this ethical challenge is necessarily prior to Being. Indeed, the subjectivity of Being is *derived from* the ethical encounter between Being and the Other. Thus, Being's very subjective identity in the human person is beholden to this original encounter, and from this debt springs the subject's invincible responsibility toward the Other. As such, this responsibility is not optional. It is not derived from Being and therefore does not depend on Being's consciousness of it for its constitution. Instead, Being owes its very existence to it, a debt that can never be paid as long as there is Being and that therefore constitutes the very identity of Being. This places the Other at the center of the subject's

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 80-82.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

concern.<sup>12</sup>

This conception of the human subject has implications for epistemology. Levinas decries the Western philosophical hubris in understanding the unknown as that which theoretically can be known. With its ontological basis, philosophy in the West understands learning primarily as the process by which Being absorbs that which is outside of Being and makes it one with itself. Thus, there is only sameness. Although Western philosophy theorizes about the existence of the Other, that which is entirely outside of Being, Levinas claims that it forgets its existence in a lusty grasping of all that is into Being and denying the existence of that which cannot be absorbed. Thus, he perceives Western, ontologically-based epistemology as a grasping epistemology, in which the subject absorbs into itself what it comes to know. In contrast, he proposes that the existence of the Other is prior to Being and can never be fully absorbed without losing its nature.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Levinas proposes a revolutionary understanding of learning, as described by Colin Davis:

>[phenomenological description] remains within the world of light, the world of the solitary ego who has no relationship with the other as other, for whom the other is another me, an *alter ego* known by empathy, that is, by a return to oneself. = In a world thus illumined, possessed and understood, there is no place for anything outside the subject. ...Levinas attempts to describe encounters which do not annul the otherness, the constitutive strangeness of the Other. The imperious metaphors of possession, property and comprehension are replaced by a vocabulary which instead privileges approach, proximity, caress, and fecundity.<sup>14</sup>

Levinas therefore questions a religious education which can imagine knowledge of God in terms of concepts to be possessed, owned, or comprehended, let alone mastered. He calls for a radical re-visioning of the whole concept of learning about a God who remains cloaked in mystery or else disappears entirely before the attempt to grasp the Deity.<sup>15</sup> Levinas' ideas require religious education to begin imagining what it means for learners to approach the Other through others, to relate intimately to God, and to be transformed in the encounter. This would seem to suggest that religious education is more a matter of ethical relationship than it is a matter of studying concepts about the deity or about religion. That is, faith understood as action that arises out of responsible relationship is central to the process of religious education—far more central than the study of facts and concepts.

### **Converging Upon the Biblical Way of Knowing**

The praxis school of religious education theorists finds resonance in the perspective taken

---

<sup>12</sup>Cf., *Ibid.*, p. 85; also Levinas, *A Substitution*, in *Hand*, pp. 95, 101, and *passim*.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Levinas, *A Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite*, in Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 88-119.

<sup>14</sup>Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup>See Davis, pp. 96-100.

by Levinas. One of its basic premises is that the only real knowledge is that which is translated into behavior or action. Espousing a praxis epistemology, it leads to a praxis model both of theology and of religious education. Daniel Schipani summarizes the fundamental aspects of this approach as follows:

...the liberationist praxis epistemology...attempts to restate and contextualize the preferential Abiblical way of knowing.@ The twofold emphasis there is on obedience to the will of God and on discipleshipBi.e., concrete and daily faithful following of Jesus ChristBas the means for the epistemological and ethical discernment of the divine will in the midst of the current historical situation. [Corresponding to this is the] performative (i.e., praxis-oriented) view of the Christian faith, again with a twofold emphasis on doing justice and participating in the re-creative and liberating project of the reign of God in and for the world.<sup>16</sup>

Schipani=s mention of a Biblical way of knowing is key here. Levinas is deeply indebted to Biblical insights for his particular perspective and, like the Christian praxis theorists, writes about knowing in terms of obedience. This obedience is the result of the Subject=s rousing encounter with the Other. Levinas talks about the Other, that which cannot be absorbed into the Same, as disrupting the Subject=s self-possessed complacency and calling the Subject to ethical responsibility, the inbreaking of revelation upon the peaceful self-satisfaction of Being demanding a response.<sup>17</sup> Knowledge understood as absorption by the Subject of something into itself Levinas claims reflects only a certain level of intelligence, represented by the image of the Subject as asleep, content with itself. He asks,

Does the Spirit reach its limit in self-possession? Are there not grounds for imagining a relation with an Other that would be >better= than self-possession? Is there not a certain way of >losing one=s soul= which comes from deference to something greater or better or >higher= than the soul? Perhaps it is only in this act of deference...that seeking, desire and questioning are therefore better than possession, satisfaction and answers.<sup>18</sup>

Levinas describes the awakening of the self-possessed subject as obedience to its responsibility to the Other. This awakening to obedience is what he understands as Revelation. This Revelation is the burning bush of the Jewish Scriptures, the Biblical sense of call to responsibility for the Other that cannot be fulfilled but ever calls out to the Subject. It is unquenchable and is the eternal question put to the Subject, forbidding complacency in the presumption of answers. Levinas thus places epistemological priority on the question rather than

---

<sup>16</sup>Schipani, p. 118.

<sup>17</sup>These ideas are found throughout Levinas= writings. See for example, Levinas, ASubstitution,@ in Hand, especially his discussion of AFinite Freedom@ on pp. 111-119 or AEthics as First Philosophy,@ in the same volume, where he talks about this issue specifically in relation to knowledge, especially pp. 82-86.

<sup>18</sup>Levinas, ARevelation in the Jewish Tradition,@ in Hand, p. 209.

the answer, on learning as the eternal attitude of questioning and being questioned rather than on the process of acquiring answers and mastering concepts. Learning is thus more process than content and realizes itself in the growing awareness in the Subject of its responsibility to the Other expressed through responsible, loving action toward others..

### **The Priority of Orthopraxis**

This way of speaking has parallels with the focus of praxis epistemology on orthopraxis. The emphasis on orthopraxis over against the traditional emphasis on orthodoxy resembles Levinas= emphasis on ethics over against ontology. Just as Levinas calls for a renewed priority for ethics, so praxis theorists call for a renewed priority for action.

With obedience and discipleship as two fundamental aspects of praxis epistemology in relation to faith, theorists emphasize that knowledge of God can only come through orthopraxis, or, in Schipani=s words, Acommitment and active engagement in concretely living out the Christian faith; or, the faithful following of Jesus Christ in the midst of the historical and existential situation.@<sup>19</sup> For most theorists in this school, the defining historical and existential situation is that of the poor and oppressed. One comes to know Christ through solidarity with them, and in the knowing one is transformed and converted to act for justice. Knowledge of God is in the dynamics of this relation, and the knowledge leads one to deeper commitment and solidarity with those who are oppressed. In essence, to the extent that one can live out the ethical vision of Levinas, one might say that the outcome of Levinas= ethics and that of praxis theorists is the same. Perhaps that is because their fundamental inspiration flows out of a biblical epistemological perspective.

What may be key here is the recognition, if the above assertion is correct, that to the extent that Levinas effectively addresses a contemporary concern regarding fundamental philosophy as wrongly ordered, praxis epistemological theorists of religious education provide a means for revising religious education practice that addresses this fundamental issue.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Readers of Levinas often find his vision of the Subject=s responsibility to the Other overwhelming. Levinas speaks of the relation in almost violent terms. For instance, he claims that the subject is held hostage by this responsibility.<sup>20</sup> It is an intentional exaggeration. No doubt, Levinas= tendency to exaggerate this responsibility is founded on the exaggerated ways in which humanity has failed in this responsibility in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including spectacular failures that dwarf any language Levinas might use to communicate the urgency and immensity of our responsibility for and to one another. Levinas was in fact a direct victim of that very failure by which we measure all other human failures to meet its responsibility to the Other, the murder of 6 million Jews and others in Germany during World War II. In the face of this assault on humanity, Levinas seems more than justified in his ethical exaggeration.<sup>21</sup> This experience is

---

<sup>19</sup>Schipani, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup>Levinas, ASubstitution,@ in Hand, p. 107.

<sup>21</sup>Peperzak, p. 4; Richard Kearney, PhD., AWho is Emmanuel Levinas, the Person?@ (Notes from lecture delivered to the Religion and Education Doctoral Seminar on March 28, 2000), Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

what makes Levinas question the complacency of Being in its self-possessed totality, seeing where the idea of constant human progress can lead if Being is not shocked out of its self-possessed slumber.

It is important to note, meanwhile, that Levinas does not deny the existence of Being, but its priority in Western philosophy. His project is to replace that *priority* with *another priority*, but not to do away with Being. It is because his project is so radical, so unheard-of in Western philosophy, that Levinas has a need to exaggerate it. It is important to see this because it is important to understand that Levinas still sees a place for Being and a role for the subject. However, he has upset the possibility of ever conceiving these outside the matrix of their prior responsibility and relationship to the Other. He gives them new meaning and challenges any conception of them that would neglect their primary identity as subjects for the Other. By doing so, he does not create a new hegemony for ethics, but destabilizes the hegemony of ontology, thus providing a way to understand Being as contingent upon the ethical question, but not separate from it. As such, he transforms all of the concerns of Being so that they are seen through the lens of this ethical concern that is prior to any other concern.

In his critical appraisal of praxis theories of religious education, Schipani points out that it is insufficient to place orthopraxis in opposition to orthodoxy, that knowing comes through the revealed word as well as through obedience to one's responsibility toward the Other. In fact, he claims, they are one. Following Groome, he agrees that

praxis as the obedience of faith must occur in a historical contextual dialogue with scripture and the broader story of the Christian people and the vision of God's reign, including the church's teaching and discernment.<sup>22</sup>

There is a necessary place for content, therefore, even in praxis theories of religious education. However, if one agrees that a Biblical way of knowing is more in tune with orthopraxis than orthodoxy, without denying the importance of the latter, and if one agrees with Levinas that the priority of ethics over ontology must be realized in religious education practice as well as in philosophy in general, then one finds the same kind of trenchant hegemony of ontology that inspires Levinas to overstate his case. Only this can account for the continuing almost exclusive reliance on a schooling model of religious education<sup>23</sup> and for the strange nature of service projects unintegrated or poorly integrated into what seems to be the real business-as-usual of religious education—the teaching of concepts. Even in those religious education processes apparently convinced of the value of the praxis approach, priority is still placed on the grasping of content. Only this can explain why an action such as that which Stephanie and her classmates chose explicitly in response to and as an organic outgrowth of their religious education, remained an extra-curricular activity in the most literal sense of the term.

If Levinas's perspective is to be taken seriously, this has to be questioned. Levinas challenges religious education to begin not with knowledge, but with action that is responsive to one's relation to the other. It is the process of reflection on the action which requires the study

---

<sup>22</sup>Schipani, p. 136.

<sup>23</sup>Maria Harris points to this issue in, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 118.



of concepts, but only that. Levinas has upset the idea that the two can be separate. Levinas has also questioned any attempt to study concepts first or to study them at all except for their ability to shed critical light on one's actions. Levinas radically critiques an attempt to do religious education with a praxis orientation that sees past, present, and future action as somehow an appendage to the study of tradition. Rather, he would seem to suggest that action is the central concern in religious education. The formal aspect of religious education would then be critical reflection on action. Study of concepts would subsequently inform reflection.

That is, the primary goal or aim of religious education is obedient discipleship, which for Christians involves most fundamentally loving service of the Other. This obedience and discipleship is learned through participation and emulation, and is deepened through disciplined, critical reflection rooted in the life of Christ and the attempt to sacramentalize Christ's presence in the world. Critical reflection on this action is informed in a supporting way through the codified tradition of the church, as well as the wisdom embodied in the community and its actions. What is key, therefore, for the formation of Christian identity is this ethically responsible action of following Christ in his way of self-giving love for all Others. This is the Biblical understanding of knowledge, and as such, it is the preferred way of forming identity. Levinas provides us with the contemporary philosophical foundation upon which this way of knowing, this epistemology, can be built.

### Works Cited

- Bryk, Anthony S., Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Flannery, O.P., Austin, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996.
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did*
- The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*. 1986
- Connell, Martin, ed. *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996.
- Schipani, Daniel S. *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988.
- Groome, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980.
- Hand, Seán, ed. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989, reprinted 1998.
- Peperzak, Adriaan. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 1993.
- Davis, Colin. *Levinas: An Introduction*. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1996.
- Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.