

EDUCATION IN TIME OF WAR: GEORGE JOHNSON AND THE COMMISSION  
ON AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

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In a commencement address at Trinity College, Washington, DC on June 5, 1944, Monsignor George Johnson, the leading voice for Catholic education in his era, attacked the realism that pervaded United States culture at that time, with the Second War coming to a close. He decried that

We are counseled to arrive at conclusions about things in general and the present state of human affairs in particular in a realistic manner, [that] we ought to be realistic about the war, realistic about the peace, realistic about matters social and economic, realistic in the sphere of domestic relations, realistic about the truth, realistic about morals. (Johnson 1944a, 407)

For him this objectionable form of realism called for the sacrifices of principle for expediency, capitulation to circumstances, justification of means by their ends, minimizing the role of justice and right in the affairs of nations, neglecting the rights of small nations and a denial of the hope that “out of all the horror, the waste, and the destruction of war there will emerge a world in which the weak will not be at the mercy of the strong” (1944, 408). Johnson also challenged the doctrine of unconditional surrender as not squaring with the canons of mercy. Many of these opinions were not popular in the days of calls for loyalty and patriotism, especially in the midst of a war that the vast majority of the nation judged to be just. Johnson no doubt had in mind the baneful consequences of the political realism and even the Christian realism of many defenders of the war.

Johnson countered this prevailing doctrine of realism with a philosophy of life and an educational philosophy that centered on the teaching of Jesus and supernatural truths, which emphasized the enduring value of Christian truths even in the time of a war generally viewed as a “good” and just war. Near the end of this talk Johnson was stricken by a heart attack, the cause of his death a day later. This premature death at the age of fifty-seven was lamented not only in the Catholic community but among members of the Religious Education Association, which chose him as its first Catholic vice-president and called him “a great churchman, a man of scholarly mind and friendly spirit...[who] ;left a rich legacy of fruitful labors (*Religious Education* 1944, 204). The last words he uttered were that “we still have a lot to learn about educating unto Christ in a world that knows not Christ” (411).

George Johnson was well suited for his task as a chief spokesperson for Catholic education during the depression and World War II. A professor at Catholic University of America since 1921, he was appointed in 1925 the director of the Department of Education of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and secretary general of the National Catholic Educational Association. These posts gave him national influence on

direction of United States education and led to appointments on several presidential committees. In the words of a contemporary historian

Johnson was practical, pragmatic, and self-effacing, yet e also had strong convictions about the purpose of Catholic schooling in a free society. He combined native organizational and political skills with the intellectual drive and educational philosophy of Thomas Shields. (Walch 2003, 124)

In 1938 at the beginning of hostilities in Europe Pope Pius XI asked the Catholic University of American to establish a Commission on American Citizenship. The Rector of the University organized such a commission comprising 141 members, both Catholics and non-Catholics. The Commission was headed by Fr. George Johnson and Msgr. Frederick J. Haas, both on the faculty of the Catholic University of America. In time Johnson became executive director and the chief moving force in this endeavor. (Johnson 1944b).

The purpose of the commission was to bring Catholic social and economic teaching to bear on Catholic educational endeavors, especially through the development of new curricula for colleges and schools. The context of the work of the commission was the emergence of totalitarian social theories such as communism, fascism, and National Socialism. With Robert J. Slavin, professor of philosophy at Catholic University, Johnson wrote the commission's statement of principles, *Better Men for Better Times* (1943) and directed the publication of textbooks.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit the efforts of Johnson and this Commission for a religious centered education both during and after the Second World War. Some reference will also be made to other religious educators who grappled with the problems of war and post-war United States. Citizenship is a difficult task at all times but it is especially in times of war that the diverse demands of citizenship, -patriotism and criticism-, engender individual and social conflict. It may be fruitful for us in these days to examine how thoughtful religious persons addressed these issues in the midst of the greatest international crisis of the twentieth century. A study of the career of the man who stood at the center of this endeavor may illuminate the tensions educators, and particularly religious educators, experience in troubled times.

### **George Johnson**

The trajectory of Johnson's career is shown in his writings and the positions he held. He wrote a dissertation in 1919 on the philosophy of Catholic elementary school, under Thomas Shields at Catholic University. In a work of great erudition Johnson reviewed the history and philosophy of the curriculum of schooling with special attention to Catholic schools. He manifested a thorough and sympathetic knowledge of scholarly developments in Europe and the United States. Like Shields he accepted many of the principles of the new psychology and pedagogy. The entire dissertation was published over a period of two years in the *Catholic Educational Review* (1919-1920), edited by Shields and Edward Pace at Catholic University.

Johnson succeeded Shields at Catholic University after the latter's sudden death in 1921. Upon taking this teaching position in the Department of Education Johnson began to address many of the curricular, administrative, and policy issues facing Catholic education, especially schools. He was often asked to address gatherings of Catholic educators on such topics as curriculum reform, preparation of teachers and administrators, the teaching of religion, parent teachers groups, the role of pastors in education, and teacher shortages. Most of these talks and additional articles were published in *Catholic Educational Review*, of which he became editor.

In 1925 the hierarchy of the Catholic Church chose Johnson to be their major educational spokesperson as head of the Catholic Education Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. He was also made secretary general of the National Catholic Educational Association. He held both of these positions until his death in 1944. In these positions he addressed such national issues as the debate over the United States Office of Education, which he opposed, federal aid to schools, the centralization of schools at the federal level, the Depression Era educational initiatives of President Franklin Roosevelt, the war time educational initiatives of the same President, and the plan for recovery after the war. He was appointed to many federal commissions that dealt with these problems.

Johnson became the champion defender of Catholic education. On many occasions he made the case for Catholic education, and in so doing he gradually distanced himself from his earlier enthusiasm for the initiatives of progressive education. He still accepted much of the psychology and pedagogy of the progressives but rejected what he thought were their heretical philosophical views. His progressive stance "favored supplementing traditional study and recitation assignments with group discussions, field trips and projects. He also endorsed the use of objective tests and supported educational programs geared to the individual need of the child (McCluskey 1973, 393)

A strong supernationalist perspective permeated his approach, untouched as almost all Catholic educators were at the time by the currents of liberal theology that permeated many Protestant religious educators. Much of his effort can be understood as the attempt to make the case that Catholic schools offered a distinctive philosophy of life and education which would better serve the interests of Catholic parents and their children. Catholics and their schools were often on the attack during these years for distancing themselves from the public school movement.

### **Johnson and the War**

Johnson (1937a) as an educator stressed that religious education should always involve itself in the political, social, and economic realities without losing sight of its spiritual mission. Before a gathering of educators Johnson addressed the possibility of war in the midst of the social, political and economic insecurity of the times. Economic ills in the country and the rise of dictatorships in the world caused him to observe that

“all of us stand in constant dread lest sober thought yields places to bitter controversy and that before we realize it the whole matter will be proposed to the cruel and futile adjudication of war” (1937b, 258).

In a sermon at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City on September 15, 1940 Johnson addressed the duties of teachers in the defense of American democracy. In this sermon he contrasted the enterprise of education, which is a peaceful undertaking of noble and beautiful things, with the present atmosphere of the world in which war had already begun in Europe and in which defense preparations were being made in the United States. While he insisted that schools “could not, and should not, lose complete sight of the realities of the world in which it operates (CER 1940, 38, 450)”, he went on to point out that

As far as education is concerned, peace is the portion of its inheritance and apart from peace its aspirations are nugatory. It must hold fast hopes and refuse to admit that there can be nothing save wars and dissensions. It must learn from the present sad condition of the human family, the tragic consequences that result when the spirit of man loses its way, and must address itself to the heartbreaking task of finding that way anew. (450)

Johnson expressed concerns for what defense buildup and the preparation for the drafting of young men would have on national endeavors, including education. Thinking only about war would affect college admissions, the supply of skilled workers for the work force and produce an attitude of thinking and talking only about war. He feared that defense was being defined too narrowly in military terms and called for defending America by “means of a dogged, untiring, uncompromising offensive against forces like selfishness, greed for power, and greed for wealth, love of pleasure and love of ease, refusal to admit the fact of our creaturehood and the deification of our whims and desires” (451).

For Johnson education defends democracy by inculcating respect for human personality and recognition of basic human rights. He finds the most satisfactory basis for these beliefs in the spiritual nature of human beings. Thus for him the religious dimension of education should be an essential dimension of an education for democratic living that could ward off the threat of totalitarianism that threatens many countries in the world. This education must also recognize the roots of human injustice that are in the hearts of humans and use the strength of religion to uproot these seeds. The education that can accomplish this is one that inspires learners through active methods to live the truth.

Johnson addressed the war again in 1941 in his address before the National Catholic Educational Association (CER, 38, 257-264). Speaking on “Our Task in the Present Crisis” he accepted the fact that entrance into the war was inevitable with the build up of armaments and shifts in the United States economy. For him “something new, something different will have to go into the making of our future citizens if they are to meet what is ahead of them intelligently and bravely” (257). He also predicted that

“our greatest problems will emerge only when the war is over, and it is then that educators will need to muster all the vision and all the adaptability of which they are capable” (257).

In this address Johnson discussed the upcoming draft of men, the role of women’s college in the war effort, problems with the employment of youth in the defense industries, and the expansion of federal activities. Johnson also treated the touchy issue of teaching citizenship in schools. To the courses that have been introduced he argued that training of the will should go hand and hand with training of the mind, quoting Aristotle’s dictum that “knowledge avails little, if anything, toward virtue.” In his view democratic education is predicated on the fact that individual human personality is sacred and inviolable, a truth that must be rooted in affirming the existence of God. With what is now infelicitous wording he asserts that individuals “must be made subject to restraint and regimentation in the name of the common good” (269).

During the month of October 1941 Johnson gave four radio addresses on the Catholic Hour on the practical aspects of patriotism. He called for a renewed patriotism in the face of attacks on United States democracy, which has shown some weaknesses in the economic and political life. He considered patriotism part of the practice of the virtue of justice, which includes those duties which we owe to our fellow humans by reason of the fact that we share with them the same homeland, cherish the same ideals, and live under a government that protects and fosters our common interests (Johnson 1941b).

In these talks Johnson discoursed on the role of patriotism in the home, the community, and in leisure activities. Civilian defense means first of all that homes of the people are worth defending, citizens contribute to the well being of their communities by aiding the needy and combating intolerance, communities are socially controlled, and leisure activities strengthen and re-create individuals. The guiding principle of patriotism is that citizens work together for the common welfare. Nothing is found in these addresses on the role that criticism and constructive dialogue might contribute to a democratic way of life.

Johnson’s loyalty to the war effort was manifest in his 1942 report to the NCEA membership in which he explained that

Catholic education has a vital stake in the outcome of this war. The forces that are arrayed against our country at the same forces that in other lands are arrayed against the church.... Our schools and colleges do not live in a vacuum; they are part and parcel of life and living and were never intended to afford a cloistered refuge from reality. Though they thrive best in peace, they must now gird themselves for war. When freedom was imperiled their very reason for existence hangs in the balance (1942, 75).

***Better Men for Better Times***

*Better Men for Better Times* (1943) formulated the principles of Catholic social teaching in a practical manner to be of benefit to teachers in the Catholic schools. It presents a vision of what responsible citizenship should be in a time of crisis.

*Better Men* couches praise for American democracy with recognition that there are dark chapters in our history including slavery and civil war. It realistically points out that

Oppressions have been wrought under the Stars and Stripes; they are being wrought today—which only proves that true democracy envisaged by the men who laid the foundations of our government and our nation, is not something that happens automatically (4).

Despite these and other failures including dislocations during World War I and corrupt politics, *Better Men* offers praise for American democracy for bringing about prosperity, a high standard of living, and good schools. “Often we have been stupid, frequently intolerant, and now and then vicious, but in the main we have been kind to one another (7).

The authors make the case that the military defense build-up should not neglect the many ills that beset the nation: malnutrition, bad housing, unemployment, preventable physical illness, lack of security, starvation wages, sectionalism, discrimination, neglect of higher values, and irreligion (35).

The work called for broadening the social mission of the Catholic Church to embrace everything in life and urged Catholics to work as good citizens with all persons of good will. This went counter to the widespread practice of the time which often saw the Catholic Church remaining within its own confines and refusing to cooperate with others, especially other religious groups, for fear of fostering religious indifferentism.

*Better Men* is sensitive to the danger of the state overreaching its powers in times of emergency in the name of national defense. It quotes the words of Pope Pius XII:

No one of good will and vision will think of refusing the State, in the exceptional conditions of the world of today, correspondingly wider and exceptional rights to meet the popular needs. But even in such emergencies, the moral law, established by God, demands that the lawfulness of each such measure and its real necessity be scrutinized with the greatest rigor according to the standards of the common good. (91)

Adherence to the moral law and the Constitution are necessary to maintain freedom.

Education is presented in the book as playing an important role in the making of a world fit for human living. Education is essential to national welfare and the first arm of defense. Education provides the experiences necessary for the development of ideas, attitudes, and habits essential for democratic societies. It takes place in all areas of

human life where persons come together to influence one another. Schooling is conscious of itself and intention,

*Better Men* explains that education is the result of self activity, learning by doing. Education is described as an active not a passive process, which has experience as its basis. The authors make the case that education takes place whenever we cooperate with the grace that is in us and with the guidance and instruction to aid persons exercise their own “power into acquiring a fuller measure of the truth, a deeper love of the good, and a finer appreciation of the beautiful” (14-15). Education should include the training of the mind and will. The best way to train the mind is to face it with real problems and to give it the opportunity and the freedom to solve them. Guidance and direction are always in order, but they should never degenerate into spoon-feeding and telling the answers.

Other religious educators deal with issues surrounding the Second World War from various perspectives. Fisher (1942) decried the treatment of Japanese Americans during the war. The Religious Education Association at its 1944 meeting dealt with various aspects of the war and the after war period (Reports from Convention Seminar Groups 1944). A study guide for local groups was prepared by the association based on this meeting (RE 1945, 40, 11-114). Sophia Fahs (1944) made suggestions for what religious educators could do for children in a war torn world.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Johnson must be situated in the Catholic Church in the United States, which had basically a defensive and apologetic stance vis-à-vis Protestant America. In his time Catholics still had to prove that they were not controlled by a foreign power and thus could be loyal citizens. Also, Johnson was a member not of a peace church but of a church that over the years honed a doctrine of just war that more often than not ended up favoring whatever the nation’s leaders decided. While within this church Johnson was an educational progressive, he was not a theological liberal, if such there were in the United States church at the time.

At the center of Johnson’s writings about the war is the issue of citizenship and patriotism. Though in some of his sermons and addresses the patriotic citizen is loyal, obedient, and conforming, the full corpus of his writings shows a more critical form of citizenship, which emerged as the war progressed and its moral ambiguities increased. While he admits the value of social control, he raised issues about what citizens and educators of citizens should do in times of national crisis.

Johnson raised issues about the sacrifices of principle for expediency, capitulation to circumstances, justification of means by their ends, minimizing the role of justice and right in the affairs of nations, neglecting the rights of small nations, and subjugation of weak nations by strong ones. He challenged the doctrine of unconditional surrender as contrary to Christian mercy.

Johnson makes us think about the nature of citizenship in the time of war, and how educators deal with this complex issue. Religious education is equipped to deal with critical citizenship since it dealt seriously with the tension of loyalty to a tradition and continuous questioning and critiquing of that tradition. At its best it “employs inquiry and debate, is sensitive to controversial issues and...is rooted in beliefs which motivate people to action” (Watson 2004, 263). Since religions transcend national borders they are able to focus on responsibilities of global citizenship. Religious education has the potential of encouraging ethical indignation, respecting spiritual, moral and ideological diversity, and encouraging dialogue. This is especially valuable at this particular time in dealing with the many varieties of Islam.

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