

Practical Christianity: Separating the Wheat of Orthopraxy  
from the Chaff of Orthodoxy

"You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"

Mark 7:8-9, NRSV

Whose Christianity? Which Criterion?

What shall we teach? What is the core subject matter of Christian religious education? If we had ten Sundays to teach the core of Christianity, what would we teach each week? Robert Schreiter asks, "Is there some way of measuring or testing a situation to gain some sense of what is genuinely Christian and what is not?"<sup>1</sup> I think that there is some way. We need some criterion or hermeneutical principal by which we choose the subject matter of our Christian education curriculum. Which biblical passages or books do we teach and emphasize? Do we get our content from the lectionary, which is itself not comprehensive? Or from the whims of preachers, teachers, and Sunday School publishers? And what of the other sources of theology: experience, reason, and tradition?

In answering these questions, at least two issues arise. First, Christian religious educators must sort out distortions of the Christian message, such as beliefs leading to racism, slavery, crusades, or terrorism, often invoked in the name of religion. These distortions are what Nel Noddings calls cultural evils.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 99.

Second, we must sort out cultural teachings that are labelled as Christian, such as, for example, prohibitions against alcohol and dancing. Although not necessarily harmful, these prohibitions are not genuine Christian doctrines or practices. Echoing the words of Jesus, we must sort out these human traditions from the commandment of God so that we teach the latter in Christian religious education.

It is not my intent to argue for one, single authoritative version of Christianity. However, as the above examples illustrate, there are some limits as to what would be considered an acceptable version of Christianity. And even within these limits, some versions may be more useful than others. Therefore, regarding what is considered to be genuinely Christian, there may well be several right answers, but there may also be many wrong answers (for example, the KKKs version of Christianity). Sorting out cultural evils and non-Christian cultural practices is a good starting point for getting a handle on the content of Christian religious education.

For Thomas Groome, the Reign of God is the "ultimate hermeneutical principle" (that is, criterion) for determining *what* to teach from the Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup> As Groome points out, Christian religious educators can present either a version of the Christian tradition legitimizing present cultural structures (I assume he is referring only to the structures that are evil) or

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Groome, Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry (New York, HarperCollins, 1991), 14.

one legitimizing the emancipatory elements of the Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> Whether we realize it or not, Christian religious educators are making value judgements and using a criterion when we reject oppression as contrary to the gospel. But by which criterion do we claim contrariness to the gospel? By which criterion do we reject oppression?

Groome draws a distinction between orthopraxy (right practice) and orthodoxy (right belief).<sup>4</sup> The purpose of my essay is to use this distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy to make a proposal for a practical Christian education curriculum, one for which "praxis" would provide a criterion (or ultimate hermeneutical principal) for distinguishing between what is genuinely Christian and what is simply a human tradition or a cultural evil. We will need to classify Christian teachings according to these (and perhaps other) categories and explore how distinctive a truly practical Christian education curriculum would look.

Some attempts have been made to address the content of Christian religious education. Yet, even when addressed, the specifics of content seem to remain significantly ignored. For instance, Martin Palmer, even though his book is entitled What Should We Teach?, essentially writes about viewing religious pluralism as a gift from God, without any treatment of the details of the content of Christian religious education.<sup>5</sup> Mary Elizabeth

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<sup>3</sup> Groome, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Groome, 260.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Palmer, What Should We Teach? (Geneva: WCC

Moore does a fine job in Education for Continuity and Change of addressing the relationship between tradition and experience. However, as she notes, very little attention has been given to the subject matter of Christian religious education.<sup>6</sup> Yet to ensure we are teaching a genuine Christianity rather than human traditions or cultural evils, Christian religious educators must give some attention to the content (subject matter) of Christian religious education.

#### Christian Content and Sociocultural Context

These questions and issues are related to deeper and more complex matters. Consider the following paraphrase of a question asked by Edward Schillebeeckx: How can the Gospel, which itself comes from a specific cultural context and can never be wholly extricated from that cultural context, speak a language of an entirely different culture?<sup>7</sup> Such questions call into consideration the limits of cultural-linguistic models of religion, which exposes issues of metaphysics such as epistemology and ontology. In depth analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay, but further research does exist.<sup>8</sup> It does seem clear, however, that cultural evils and cultural distortions

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Publications, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, Education for Continuity and Change, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, foreword to Schreiter, ix.

<sup>8</sup> See Brockman, "A Somatic Epistemology for Education," in *The Educational Forum* 65:4 (Summer 2001), pp. 328-333; see also Brockman, The Epistemological Relationship between Culture and Embodiment (Ph.D. Dissertation, Claremont School of Theology, 1997).

of Christianity do exist. The need to make some commitments regarding the essential content of Christian religious education also seems clear. At the very least, we need to acknowledge that some practices lie outside the pale of Christianity (or any religion committed to the Good).

Cultural evils and the content of Christianity. Consider the issue of what Noddings has called *cultural evils*, such as patriarchy. On what basis, if any, do we condemn patriarchy or, for instance, the version of Christianity espoused by the Ku Klux Klan? Postmodern educators are fond of embracing relativism while at the same time making universal moral claims such as the oppression of women or minorities being wrong. Assent to such moral claims seems to be based on the presupposition that there is something universal about being human. In making assumptions about the essential teachings of Christianity, Christian religious educators would certainly want to have some basis for naming practices such as slavery, the oppression of women and minorities, and terrorism as distortions of Christianity (or any other religion).

Cultural norms and the content of Christianity. Consider the issue of discerning between a genuine Christian practice and a cultural practice, both of which inevitably exist within a religious tradition. Although cultural norms such as the prohibitions against dancing or playing cards are not necessarily harmful, championing them as *Christian* is to distort the gospel message. For instance, whereas the practice of loving God, self, and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40) is essential to Christianity, the

prohibition against dancing, advocated in particular cultures of Christianity, is at best a *cultural* truth and at worst a cultural falsity. It is not a genuine element of Christianity. Christian religious educators might want to respect such prohibitions while at the same time being clear that they have very little to do with being a Christian. When we confuse cultural norms with essential Christian teachings, we do the Church a great disservice, because, to echo the words of Jesus, we confuse human traditions with the commandment of God. In the above examples, it is fairly easy to separate out the "chaff" of the cultural nature of the prohibitions against dancing and playing cards. Very few Christian religious educators would claim the efficacy of these prohibitions as essential Christian teachings. The issue becomes more difficult, however, when we are trying to discern whether what is considered to be *essentially Christian* might be merely cultural. Consider the following example.

Waiting in the Lynchburg, Virginia airport before a trip to the American Academy of Religion (A.A.R.) meeting in 1994, I found, in the bathroom, a tract explaining how to become a Christian. (Because I was going to A.A.R., I figured I had better know how to become a Christian, which, luckily, is easy--at least according to the tract.) First, we must accept our sinful nature (Rom. 3:23); second, we must acknowledge the salvific efficacy of Christ's death on the cross (Rom. 5:8); third, we must receive Christ as the only means of eternal life (Eph. 2:8-9); and finally, we must appropriate Christ's rightful claim as Lord of our lives (Rom. 10:9). According to the tract, if we follow these

steps, then we will have become a Christian.

One very important question is: How would Christian religious educators know whether the tract's interpretation is a genuinely Christian one, or whether it reflects a particular sociocultural perception of Christianity, one espoused by certain groups of American Christians? Might this understanding of Christianity be an abstraction from, or even a distortion of, a true Christian message? Might it be merely cultural, rather than essentially Christian? Why should one accept, as the essence of Christianity, this possibly randomly-selected smattering of four of the Bible's innumerable verses from merely two of the Christian Testament's twenty-seven books? Should not educators use some (or all) non-Pauline verses to define the content of Christian religious education?

#### The Essential Christian Teachings: Some Proposals

As mentioned above, very few Christian religious educators examine the assumptions they make about the content of the Christian education curriculum. Thomas Groome addresses this issue by noting the importance of the Reign of God as one general criterion for discerning genuine Christian teachings. We'll discuss Groome's ideas after we discuss those of Robert Schreiter. Schreiter makes some detailed assumptions regarding the nature of Christian normativeness.

Robert J. Schreiter's version of Christianity. By exploring the relationship between theology and sociocultural context, Schreiter is attempting to understand how various contexts determine the central teachings of Christianity. According to

Schreiter, the Christian tradition is actually a series of local theologies.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the Christian tradition is a collection of the experiences of Christian communities from various contexts at different points in history. In determining what is normative for Christianity, Schreiter lists five essential criteria for defining Christian identity.<sup>10</sup> Although Schreiter would probably claim the essential nature of the Christian *tradition* as his criterion for choosing these five criteria, he is not clear on how he chose them.

In discussing his first criterion, "The Cohesiveness of Christian Performance," Schreiter talks of a marvelous consistency within the Christian tradition in terms of the interrelations of its doctrines and symbols. (He is obviously not a Protestant.) In part, this consistency is formed because there is a hierarchy of truth within the Christian tradition--that is, some truths of the Christian faith are more central than others.<sup>11</sup> Although Vatican Council II has urged the acceptance of some hierarchy of truth, there does not seem to be any discussion about how this hierarchy of truths was derived. In fact, he subsequently notes the problematic nature of cohesiveness as a criterion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Schillebeeckx, foreword to Schreiter, ix-x.

<sup>10</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) is an excellent book on the types of relationships between Christianity and culture.

<sup>11</sup> Schreiter, 118. One wonders if this statement reflects Schreiter's Roman Catholic roots, and also whether a Protestant theologian would see the same "marvelous consistency" within the Christian tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Schreiter, 118.

Schreiter's second criterion for Christian identity is the "Worshipping Context and Christian Performance," represented by the principle *lex credendi, lex orandi*, which, translated, means the law of believing following the law of prayer. According to Schreiter, the law of prayer has been used to establish Christian identity.<sup>13</sup> In undertaking an effort to establish the essential nature of Christianity, prayer should be one of the central components. In fact, because all human knowing takes place as the human body interacts with the its environments (including the Transcendent), then we should not be surprised by the existence of prayer across religious contexts. But again, Schreiter does not offer a criterion upon which he bases the centrality of prayer.

"The Praxis of the Community and Christian Performance" is the third criterion for Christian identity. Liberation theologies, Schreiter says, have reminded the world of the importance of Christian action--"by their fruits you will know them" remains one of the most cardinal Christian doctrines.<sup>14</sup> But again, Schreiter does not give any indication of which criterion Christians would use in discerning genuinely Christian fruits from, for instance, the fruits of the Christianity practiced by the Ku Klux Klan. Some criterion by which good praxis can be separated from evil praxis is needed.

"The Judgement of Other Churches and Christian Performance" and "The Challenge to Other Churches and Christian Performance"

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<sup>13</sup> Schreiter, 118-19.

<sup>14</sup> Schreiter, 119.

are the fourth and fifth criteria for determining Christian identity.<sup>15</sup> Again, Schreiter does not mention the basis for determining these last two criteria (although he must be presupposing the existence of some basis). For instance, according to Schreiter, if the North American churches fail to respond to the challenge of the poor churches, then they would be violating the fifth criterion of Christian identity.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, Schreiter is basing this assertion upon some criterion, because he attests to some connection between being Christian and helping the poor.

Thomas Groome and the Reign of God. Groome's ultimate criterion for determining the content of Christian religious education is the Reign of God. Groome seems to be calling for something universal, rather than merely cultural. In referring to the Reign of God, Groome notes the universality of this symbol, its mythical longings for peace, justice, love, freedom, well-being, and equality being intended for "all creation."<sup>17</sup> Although recorded within the Bible and the Christian tradition, the Reign of God transcends them. In fact, according to Groome, "the Christian church throughout its history has taught that there is ultimate (even eternal) consequence to living or not living one's Christian faith."<sup>18</sup> Groome exhorts Christians to "do what is most

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, 119-21.

<sup>16</sup> Schreiter, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Groome, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Groome, 22.

humanizing and life-giving for all."<sup>19</sup> These excerpts offer a little bit of the flavor of what Groome proposes in terms of a method for discerning what is essential to Christianity.

#### What Does Genuinely Christian Mean?

Genuinely Christian is defined as those teachings from within Christianity that are life-giving and humanizing for all. Genuine Christianity would have to be modelled after the Good. To echo Groome above, it would include such things as peace, justice, love, and equality; in short, values of universal benefit. There are many universal elements *within* the Christian tradition, as well as within many other religious traditions. It would behoove Christian religious educators to teach these elements of the tradition because they, in having universal benefit, can lend credence to the view that Christianity (or any other religion) is more than merely of regional or historical significance. Put another way, certain religious teachings have relevance far beyond the context in which they were discovered.

In assessing the genuineness of the content of a particular version of Christian religious education, the following four categories of teachings might be used: *genuinely Christian practice, culturally Christian, culturally non-Christian, and culturally evil*. The aim of these categories is to provide a framework for beginning a discussion about the content of Christian religious education, to put down on paper what we all do in practice: make value judgements about certain practices.

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<sup>19</sup> Groome, 30.

It might be instructive to begin a tentative list of Christian teachings as they might be classified according to these four categories. The first category is genuine Christian teachings. Some genuine Christian teachings are the love of God, self and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40), the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12), the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the warning against judging other persons (Matt. 7:1-5), the cleansing of the Temple (John 2:12-17), and the practice of prayer (for example, Matt. 14:23 and Mark 6:46). To be sure, there are many more transcultural components within the Christian tradition, teachings against the oppression of women and minorities being counted among them.

The second category is culturally Christian doctrines, which are teachings that have been part of the Christian tradition but do not seem to have universal benefit. Some examples of culturally Christian doctrines or practices are the doctrine of the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus/Christ, the doctrine of the virgin birth, and the Apostles' Creed. These doctrines may be of regional or cultural significance, but cannot be said to be universally valuable. These examples help to illustrate the difference between orthopraxy and orthodoxy.

The following example may help to clarify (further) the difference between these first two categories of Christian teachings. As mentioned above, the doctrine of loving God and neighbor would be an example of an essentially Christian doctrine.

The doctrine of the Trinity, I argue, would be an example of a culturally Christian doctrine. Although the doctrine of the

Trinity has meaning in certain cultures wherein doctrine is understood more in propositional terms, it may not be pertinent in other cultures where highly conceptualized doctrines are unimportant.

The third category of teaching mentioned above is non-Christian cultural norms. Some examples of non-Christian cultural norms have already been mentioned: prohibitions against cussing, drinking, and dancing. These prohibitions would be examples of culturally acceptable, non-Christian doctrines because, although it is an acceptable norm in certain cultures, it has no formal basis in Christianity. We may or may not want to teach these values, but we certainly ought to be careful about labelling them as part of the core of the Christian education curriculum.

The fourth category listed above is cultural evils. Some examples of cultural evils are the racism espoused by the KKK, slavery, and the oppression of women and minorities. These teachings/practices are distortions of what is genuinely Christian (or Buddhist or Jewish). Yet, these beliefs are held to be good in some cultures and taught as part of that culture's curriculum.

As such, there needs to be some basis upon which we can reject such cultural evils. Whether or not we allow for it in theory, we all make value judgements in practice. For example, women might reflect upon their embodied experience as oppressed persons in order to judge whether interpretations (which have often been used to justify patriarchal ways of being) of Ephesians 5:22, which seems to exhort women to submit to their husbands, are actually distortions of the Christian message, being cultural evils.

### Conclusions

Obviously, major theoretical work would be necessary to justify these categories fully. However, the facts are clear. Everyone makes value judgements about good and evil. Cultural evils exist and/or have existed within many religious traditions, Christian or otherwise. And some teachings are more central than others. Why not give praxis a chance as a criterion for determining the core curriculum of a Christian religious education? Imagine a church that recites the great commandment every week rather than the Apostles' Creed. Such a church might just have the relevance the real world needs.