

# ***Literacy of the Heart: Finding a Language for the Affective Dimension of Religious Education***

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*In previous generations, the affective dimension of religious education was communicated more implicitly through ritual, art, music, storytelling, and rites of passage. In the contemporary era, a therapeutic culture has highlighted emotionality and developed a precise language and out-come oriented focus. In such a culture, religious education requires a denser theory and a more sophisticated language for the role of emotion in the faith formation process. This article summarizes six years of quantitative and qualitative research in a Catholic diocese in southern Illinois, and suggests "emotional intelligence" as a dialogue partner for the role of emotion in religious education.*

Despite influences from humanistic psychology, the field of religious education has failed to develop a widely accepted theory on the role of emotion both in the life of faith and the practical challenges of religious formation. In a culture making both a science and an art form out of manipulating and pandering to emotionality through the sophisticated tools of modern media, the absence of such a theory is detrimental to the field's effectiveness. As research, theorizing and methodologies on affective learning continue to develop in other fields and become popularized in the culture, religious education will find itself increasingly irrelevant to the contemporary world.

Over a six-year period between 1993 and 1999, the Diocese of Belleville in Illinois conducted 20 quantitative and qualitative research projects on the role of emotion in religious education. This research, which focused at various times on students, parents and teachers, included the administration of a number of surveys: one given to more than 4,000 youth and parents conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, and another to more than 700 K-12 Catholic school students. A separate inquiry consisted of a multi-year action research project that incorporated elements of faith formation with a diocesan sports program and tracked reactions of coaches and parents. The most in-depth study was conducted over a one-year period, consisting of interviews, surveys and classroom observations with 12 Catholic elementary school teachers from three different schools (suburban, rural and inner city). The teachers represented grades 4 through 8.

The studies conducted in the Diocese of Belleville complement only a few works focused specifically on affectivity and religious education (Durka & Smith, 1979; Johnson, 1983; Harris, 1987). These previous works attempted to surface issues and summarize methodologies for bringing the Christian faith tradition to bear on more social and emotional dimensions of faith and the process of passing it on to others. Social science research was not conducted.

Two patterns continued to surface in the Belleville studies. The first was the critical role emotionality played in the transmission of a religious faith tradition. Data indicated that "all age groups" were *most* attracted to a religious tradition at the point

at which faith beliefs or practices generate bodily or somatic changes in their awareness. In other words, as a rule men, women, youth and children appear far more interested in how religion makes them “feel” than in how it makes them “think.”

The second pattern was the difficulty religious educators had in maneuvering this murky terrain of emotionality. Belleville research suggested the vast majority of religious educators lacked an adequate language for presenting the affective insights and emotional implications of a faith tradition. Such a language requires a realization of the interdependence between “thinking” and “feeling” that neuroscience is discovering is essential to all forms of learning (Greenspan, 1997). Teachers not only lacked this realization, but also showed little awareness of the *need* for a conceptual bridge between these two powerful forces in human consciousness.

In the mid-1930s, a student asked John Dewey what role he thought emotion played in the process of thinking. After several minutes of silent reflection, Dewey responded: “Knowledge is a small cup of water floating on a sea of emotion” (Williams, 1982, p. 127). Dewey’s words were a great challenge to most traditional Christian faith communities of his time. Formed under the classical influence of the competitive relationship of passion and reason, Western religion was also lumbering under the weight of a post-Enlightenment rationalism that emphasized intellect and reason as the high road to conversion and religious authenticity.

In most religious traditions, “orthodoxy,” right thinking, was the goal and summit of religious education, forming the mind to think clearly in its pursuit of answers to life’s most fundamental questions: “Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?” Reason, purified by faith, offered the essential human faculty for finding one’s way up the mountain in search of a vista of greater understanding.

Pope John Paul II (1999), a philosopher with a nuanced classicist worldview of reason’s role in human consciousness, explains reason with the metaphor of a “light” for the misty caverns of the mind. It is primarily the faculty of the intellect that allows a person to answer questions of ultimate concern and catch glimpses of the absolutes, universals and transcendence at the source of truth, beauty and goodness. In this view, the intellect’s natural propensity to seek truth, organic unity and logical coherence is at the heart of the religious quest, spiritual maturation and, by inference, religious education.

The importance of intellectual distinction and reasoned argument notwithstanding, most religious educators find their students do not respond enthusiastically to a faith tradition presented and organized according to the dictates of reason. Parker Palmer describes the educational consequences of this kind of overly intellectualized presentation. While a student, Palmer said he learned about the Third Reich in some of the best schools in the nation. But, the material was presented in a way that “never connected with the inwardness” of his life because “everything was objectified and externalized,” leaving him “morally and spiritually deformed”(Palmer, 1999, p. 25).

Connecting with Palmer’s inwardness required his holistic engagement with the data, concepts, and learning experiences on the Third Reich. He needed to “subjectify” and “internalize,” or, as Bernard Lonergan would put it – “appropriate” the material. Brain research is demonstrating this process of appropriation is actually an

“embodiment” of the material. Real learning is not just anchored in the mind; it is part of the flesh, or more accurately, the neurons, axons, and dendrites. Learning creates neural pathways in the brain – a miraculous lattice of microscopic tissue, and the connections have as much to do with emotion as cognition. The word still become flesh, along with the image, sound, taste, smell and feeling.

Palmer’s teachers passed on facts and figures, but not *sapiential knowledge*, ultimately the sine qua non of all education, but especially religious education.

Sapience includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known (Charry, 1997, p. 4).

For learning to happen, the stories, rituals, art, history, and doctrine of a religious tradition must lead students to a “felt significance” of the ancient insights. This is the pathway of moving from religious information to sapiential knowledge. The movement occurs through the agency of the emotions. The head reaches the fruition of its search from wisdom not through the faculty of reason, as important as that may be, but through the heart.

Traditionally, the “felt significance” of religion has been corralled into the Christian formational corner of such things as liturgy, art and music, with the more “rigorous” education occurring in the study of doctrinal formulations and theological distinction. Fred Edie has provided a convincing and passionate appeal for the formative emotional impact of liturgy in creating and sustaining the community forming us into “right” passions. (Edie, Fall, 2001). For decades religious educators have attempted to bring some of this emotional impact into their classes by using more emotionally stirring tools such as collages, music, film, and art in the hopes of striking a chord of “inwardness” in their students.

Unfortunately, from the 1960s through the 1990s, the absence of an affective language prevented these arts from maximizing their power to move students. It also hampered religious educators in communicating what they were trying to achieve and actually achieving, leaving many church leaders and parents with the perception that creative, emotion-focused religious education constituted “the soft stuff” of educational experience. To observers, religion classes had become non-directed learning experiences with fuzzy objectives, unidentified learning outcomes, and few tools for demonstrating educational effectiveness. This is the reason in most parochial schools the class pictures, blood drive, and special “events” are almost always scheduled during religion classes.

Belleville research focused consistently on attempting to understand the terrain of “affective religious education,” in the hopes of taking a first step in building a language. With such a language, curriculum developers and educators could begin to explore more deeply and communicate more effectively the practical social and emotional wisdom contained in a faith tradition’s sacred writings, rituals, music, art and liturgical dramas, and, yes, even doctrine and dogma.

This language is becoming increasingly important because of the enormous changes over the past 40 years in the emotional culture of American religion. Consider one example of this shift in culture. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Pius XI

offered counsel to parents on the ideal discussion between a father and son on the “birds and the bees.”

Hence it is of the highest importance that a good father, while discussing with his son a matter so delicate (as sexuality), should be well on his guard and not descend into details, nor refer to the various ways in which this hydra destroys with its poison so large a portion of the world. (Pius XI, 1929, p. 36)

Pius XI’s comments are just a small example of the “discourse of fear” on matters of sexual practice, birth control, and divorce that was standard until the 1950s in Catholic culture (Kelly & Kelly, 1998, p. 259-277).

Though manipulative by our standards today, the discourse of fear had a sapiential quality about it. It connected the knower to the known – at least in the short term. In the Catholic community, the Second Vatican Council set in motion a dramatic and welcome transformation in the church’s emotional culture. But, the downside of this transformation has been the absence of a workable theory for the new emotional culture. The old system had a manipulative quality to it, but it also had a logic, coherence and implied certain types of methodologies.

In recent years, a few Catholic theologians have returned to the storehouse of the tradition to find conceptual tools for creating a language to suit the new emotional culture. Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola have surfaced as primary sources.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the material things of the world are not dangerous to our spiritual health, but our love for them can be. Emotions can have a “disordered attachment” to certain things that are, in and of themselves, good.

We can mold them (objects of desire) into idols if we love them supremely instead of partially. It is not material things that are dangerous, but people of misdirected desires who are dangerous because they have yet to learn to love all good things in a way proportionate to their goodness. (Wadell, 1992, p. 52)

In the field of moral theology, G. Simon Harak, S.J. (1993), has attempted to rediscover some thoughts on affectivity in the writings of both Aquinas and Ignatius. Although contemporary religious educators would have a difficult time communicating this position in a culture of “I’m Okay, You’re Okay” (Harris, 1973), Aquinas believed that Christians have proper and improper emotional responses to stimuli. Christians *should* not only do something about suffering and injustice, they *should* feel compassion in the face of suffering and outrage in the witness of injustice. They should feel awe in the presence of the transcendent; joy in the experience of goodness and truth; remorse in the wake of personal wrongdoing, etc. The Ignatian 30-day retreat is based on a similar premise of emotional formation by creating an environment for the Spirit to shape and guide our affective reactions through our imagination (Harak, p. 102). A secular philosophical argument for holding people somewhat responsible for their emotions is found in the work of Robert Solomon (Solomon, 1976, 2003).

The reclamation of Thomistic and Ignatian thought on affectivity poses weighty questions for a contemporary theory on the role of emotion in religious education: If nurturance plays such a large role in emotional reactions, in what ways can a religious educator play a significant role in this emotional formation process? Given the host of perspectives on emotions and how they work, what theory or theories offer the most religious or spiritually sound direction for this emotional formation?

These questions surface many other issues: When does emotional formation become manipulation? How does one deal ethically with the emotional formation of young children on contentious issues like racism? How does an administrator know if a specific teacher has the maturity and emotional and social “skill” or “competence” to engage in emotional formation of others?

*Building a Language of Emotionality for Religious Education:  
Insights from the Church*

Answers to these questions are not found in religious education literature. The affective dimension of religious education – both on the part of the teacher and the student – is a largely unexplored area (Wyckoff & Brown, 1995), and a theory on the role of emotion must contend with the default position many educators have for the cognitive aspects of faith.

For instance, religious education theorists can speak of the importance of the emotional perspective, but then fail to truly engage it. Ronald Goldman, whose research into religious understanding has deeply shaped religious education for much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Goldman, 1964, 1965, 1973) did advocate a “life-centered” approach to religious education. But, while advocating the teaching of religion within the context of a “personal search, a personal experience, and a personal challenge,” Goldman’s intellectual influences prevented him from engaging the affective dimension of faith. Looking for a direction in his research through the constructs of Jean Piaget, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, Goldman became focused on the role of cognition.

The most serious criticism that I would make of the Goldman research is in his failure to take into account the *affective dimension* of man’s (sic) being ... Because a child cannot articulate an understanding of religious concepts is no reason for stating that religious symbols, words, gestures, stories do not affect him at the emotional or affective level ... for many persons conceptual understanding and expression do not have the degree of importance that he seems to give them. (Elias, 1975, p. 55)

This natural inclination toward the cognitive emphasis in religious education has happened in the field as well. In the early 1950s and 1960s, religious education theory was dominated by a handful of Protestant educators. One of the principal theorists, Iris Cully (1958), found religious educators were heavily focused on the cognitive, informational content of their subject discipline and did not intentionally plan and implement affective elements in their lesson plans (Cully, 1972, p. 131).

Classroom observations of the teachers in the Belleville studies confirmed the continued existence of Cully's patterns. Many teachers deflected student questions on the emotional and social relevance or implication of certain topics. For instance, in one class on the Christian belief that Jesus did not sin, several students objected energetically. Jesus had sinned, they contended, when he became angry and turned over the moneychangers table, and when he stayed behind the caravan to discuss theology with some rabbis and scribes and worried his parents. The teacher had a great opportunity for talking about the role of emotion in morality but did not. In an after class interview she admitted to avoiding the issue because she lacked confidence in her ability to answer their concerns in a theologically accurate fashion.

A recent national study of Catholic religious education has also shown that parish and diocesan directors of religious education and pastors recognize the continued emphasis on cognitive outcomes. Religious leaders believe current religious education is considerably better at teaching the facts of the tradition than forming people in some of the more emotional dimensions of faith, like creating a passion and commitment to social justice (CARA, 2000, p. 4).

A factor inhibiting the development of a sound theory on the role of emotion in religious education is the field of theology itself, which has tended to want to purge itself of affective influence. For example, Gregory Baum maintains theology is a speculative science taking firm residence in the cognitive domain (Baum, 1970). Edward Schillebeeckx has maintained the affective content and personal piety of religious life falls outside the scientific activity of research and methodological precision called for in the theological discipline (Schillebeeckx, 1967, pp. 102-103, 252). Although Gerald Collins states "revelation," which he defines as God's "divine self-communication," is offered to the "whole person," in a further description of this belief he seems to indicate quite clearly his assumption that the "core of faith" is focused primarily on cognition. "Revelation is, as it were, salvation and grace for the mind and intellect" (Collins, 1981, p. 118).

In recent years there have been several attempts to integrate more emotional aspects into the theological enterprise, such as "body theology (Nelson, 1992) and the more erudite "neurotheology" (Newberg & D'Aquili, 2001; Joseph, 2002.). At this point, however, none of these efforts have made a major impact on religious education theory or practice.

Most of the religious educators in Belleville studies experienced the tension between the highly intellectualized theological sources of the faith tradition, and their own natural gravitation to the affective dimensions of faith. All but one of the Belleville teachers relied heavily on their religious education textbooks, rarely straying from prepackaged lesson plans due to their lack of confidence in their own understanding of theology and church teachings. At the same time, most felt more attracted to exploring the more "practical aspects" of religious faith, such as teaching the consideration of others, fairness, and acting kindly, skills and competencies one might call the "social and emotional habits of faith."

*Building a Language of Emotionality for Religious Education:  
Insights from the Culture*

If theological and religious education sources have had a difficult time articulating the affective dimension of emotion in religious education, other fields offer insights for furthering the conversation. Michel Meyer has attempted to offer a philosophical history of the passions. Beginning with Plato's image of passion as two wild horses needing to be reined in by the charioteer of the intellect and Aristotle's 14 passions, Meyer asserts St. Augustine reconfigured passions into the three cardinal sins – pride, greed, and lust. This became the basis for the critical concept of original sin, which Western culture began to reject between 1500 through 1900, by re-defining in a positive light the three cardinal sins. Meyer believes the reconstitution of these sins into positive forces is the source of contemporary nihilism. But, he also believes it offers the possibility of harmonizing the concepts of passion and reason (Meyer, 2000, p. 4) through the recognition of the importance of passion for grounding humans in the reality of the here and now:

Reason without passion spells the destruction of the soul. Whether passion intoxicates us with comfortable certitudes or awakens us with problems demanding resolution rather than effacement, it brings us face-to-face with existential questions (p. 278).

In other words, passion grounds us in the existential realities demanded by sapiential knowledge.

An existential approach to affectivity is a critical dimension for a theory on the role of emotion in religious education because it maintains an emphasis on the sapiential perspective and inhibits religious education's natural default to cognition. Daniel Goleman (1995) popularized a research-based existential approach to affectivity in his best seller, *Emotional Intelligence*. More accurately referred to as a social and emotional learning perspective (SEL), emotional intelligence is a hybrid perspective on emotionality with shades of Aquinas and Ignatius. It is a way of looking at emotion that is infinitely practical, and even sometimes in danger of becoming utilitarian.

The SEL perspective has accumulated insights from many fields: anthropology, child development and intelligence theories, sociobiology, the civil rights and women's movements, and psychoanalytic, psychological and psychiatric "prevention" work (Goleman, 1995). But, the most profound influence comes from recent work in the neurosciences that have attempted to link social and emotional competencies to neurobiological developmental processes (Cohen, 1999, p. 9). Much of this has come about through the realization of the central role the biochemistry of emotion plays in human consciousness, (Damasio, 1994; Le Doux, 1996; Pert, 1997). Tracking this biochemistry has demonstrated the tremendous influence emotional processing sections of the brain have over higher-order thinking cortical regions, sensory processing and working and long-term memory. Emotion is at the center of all aspects of learning.

The Belleville research suggests serious problems with this reality. Most teachers summarized the response of their students – and their parents – to the Catholic religious tradition as one of apathy, literally without passion or emotion. SEL researchers consider this kind of response as a failure on the part of the teacher or the material to activate the students' "emotional thermostat" (Sylwester, 2000; Damasio, 1999, pp. 35-81).

In an effort to better understand why this thermostat was not activating, the Diocese of Belleville began a cross-sectional, comparative study of fifth, eighth, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in 1993. The quantitative instrument used in these studies was the 138-item Assessment of Catholic Religious Education (ACRE), an instrument produced by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA).

The purpose of using ACRE in the comparative study was to look for positive or negative developmental patterns that might identify beginning stages of the disenchantment of Catholic youth with the church. The comparative data suggested patterns of intellectual and behavioral shifts in youth beginning in middle school. The patterns were interpreted as follows: at the outset of puberty many youth were beginning to no longer feel connected or "at home" in the church. These feelings of alienation culminated in the gradual erosion of retained cognitive, informational or conceptual knowledge *about* the tradition between eighth and 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Markuly, 1998).

Educators in all fields have wrestled with a lack of student interest. As the American emotional culture began to change in the 1960s and 1970s the self-help and self-fulfillment perspective in education spawned a number of efforts aimed at bringing affect more deliberately into the classroom, such as Confluent Education (Brown, 1971) and Values Clarification (Harmin, Kirschenbaum, and Simon, 1973; Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972; Rath, Harmin and Simon, 1978). The thinking in these movements was that the key to motivation in learning was to present concepts as much as possible in the context of immediate experience. This perspective influenced religious education a great deal in the 1970s and 1980s. But, despite some successes (Fishman and McCarthy, 1998), both of these earlier movements failed to develop a research tradition to demonstrate practical effectiveness and promote on-going development of the paradigm (Hewitt and Grady, 1999; Shapiro, 1998).

The SEL or emotional intelligence approaches and insights guiding the Belleville studies have focused on a different aspect of the learning motivation problem. Instead of using affect to educate, the emphasis has been placed on educating affect itself (Goleman, 1995, p. 262). This approach, unlike Confluent Education and Values Education, has a long and strong research background that is continuing to evolve (Brandt, 1999, pp. 173-183).

SEL research has consistently demonstrated student improvement in cognitive and behavioral performance. The movement's research is showing that when an educator can address intelligently the social and emotional needs and issues of the learner with a practical wisdom, these other improvements are natural developments. Students learn subject material better, and act more responsibly both in and outside of class. This is verifiable in poor communities employing SEL programs (Elias, Weissberg, Dodge, Hawkins, Kendall, Jason, Perry, Rotheram-Borus & Zins, 1997, p.



4) and affluent ones (Goleman, 1995, pp. 261-269). Social and emotional learning programs have been also used with success in religious schools. An example is the La Salle Academy in Providence, RI, and its' Success for Life Program (Elias et. al., 1997, pp. 35-37).

SEL has focused its research efforts on the articulation, development and evaluation of efforts to educate the specific personal and social skills necessary for living harmoniously with oneself and others. These skills of the inner life include such factors as: self-motivation, persistence, controlling impulses, delaying gratification, regulating one's moods to keep distress from swamping the ability to think, empathizing with others, handling intimacy, the ability to relearn emotional reactions, and the ability to hope. These social and emotional aptitudes are called by several different names: emotional intelligence, or EQ, social and emotional intelligence, interpersonal intelligence (understanding of the emotionality between persons) and intrapersonal intelligence (understanding of the emotionality within oneself).

Although there are several working definitions of emotional intelligence or EQ, Mayer and Solovey (1997) offer the most concise and inclusive:

Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to assess and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10).

Goleman (1999) notes that the skills of EQ were called maturity and character in previous generations. The possible correlation of these skills with goals in religious education are seen more easily in the description of an emotional intelligence tool used in much of the research in the Diocese of Belleville. The Emotional Quotient Inventory (c/a EQ-i) is a survey instrument designed to measure 16 subscales of social and emotional competencies:

**Table 1: The Scales and Subscales of the Emotional Quotient Inventory**

Scale	Description
<b><i>Intrapersonal Intelligence Scale</i></b>	Persons are aware of their affectivity.
Subscales	
Emotional Self-Awareness:	Persons know what they are feeling, and understand why they feel the way they do.
Assertiveness	Persons express feelings, thoughts and beliefs and defend rights in a nondestructive manner.

Self-Regard	Persons have a good sense of self-confidence, feel positive about themselves, know who they are.
Self-Actualization	Persons have a good idea of where they are going (or want to go) and why.
Independence	Persons are self-reliant, autonomous and independent in thinking and actions; ask for other people's advice, but make own decisions and do things for themselves. Do not cling to others.

**Interpersonal Intelligence Scale**

Subscales

Empathy	Persons are aware of and appreciate the feelings of others; sensitive to others' feelings; understand why others feel the way they feel.
Interpersonal Relationship	Persons are able to establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships, have capacity for intimacy, giving, receiving affection.
Social Responsibility	Persons are cooperative, contributing, and constructive members of their social groups; identified by others as responsible and dependable.

*Persons have the ability to relate to others.*

**Scale**

**Description**

**Adaptability Intelligence Scale**

Subscales

Problem-Solving	Persons recognize and define problems, generate and implement potentially effective solutions; solve problems rather than avoid them.
Reality Testing	Persons evaluate how closely their experience of a situation (subjectivity) corresponds with reality (objectivity).
Flexibility	Persons adjust emotions, thoughts and behaviors to changing situations and conditions.

*Persons have the capability for adjusting to the constantly changing demands of life.*

**Stress Management Scale**

Subscales

Stress Tolerance	Persons can withstand adverse events and stressful situations while remaining active and positive.
Impulse Control	Persons resist or delay impulses, defer drives and temptations to act; rarely become impatient, overreact, or lose control.
General Mood	Persons have an overall sense of goodness of self, others, and life in general.
Subscales	
Happiness	Persons feel satisfied with lives, genuinely enjoy company of others, have the ability to derive pleasure from life.

*Persons have coping skills for handling the pressures of life.*

Optimism                      Persons are able to look at the brighter side of life and maintain a positive attitude, even in the face of adversity.

*Adapted from EQ-i Technical Manual, Bar-On, 1997.*

*Exploring SEL Constructs as A Dialogue Partner in Religious Education*

Most of the Catholic religious educators in the Belleville studies recognized some or all of these EQ constructs as descriptions of the practical outcomes they hoped to achieve in their religious education efforts, and believed faith and faith formation should somehow help in the development of these skills and competencies. The teachers' life events, religious commitments and personal expectations as an educator, as described in the transcripts of their interviews, were connected easily with the individual constructs of the EQ-i. The Belleville research suggests these social and emotional skills may be *a more precise secularized description of some of the affective content of Christianity's religious tradition*. To borrow from Goleman's observations, these constructs, which were discussed in a vaguer language at other points in history, are descriptive of what has been known in other generations as Christian or religious character.

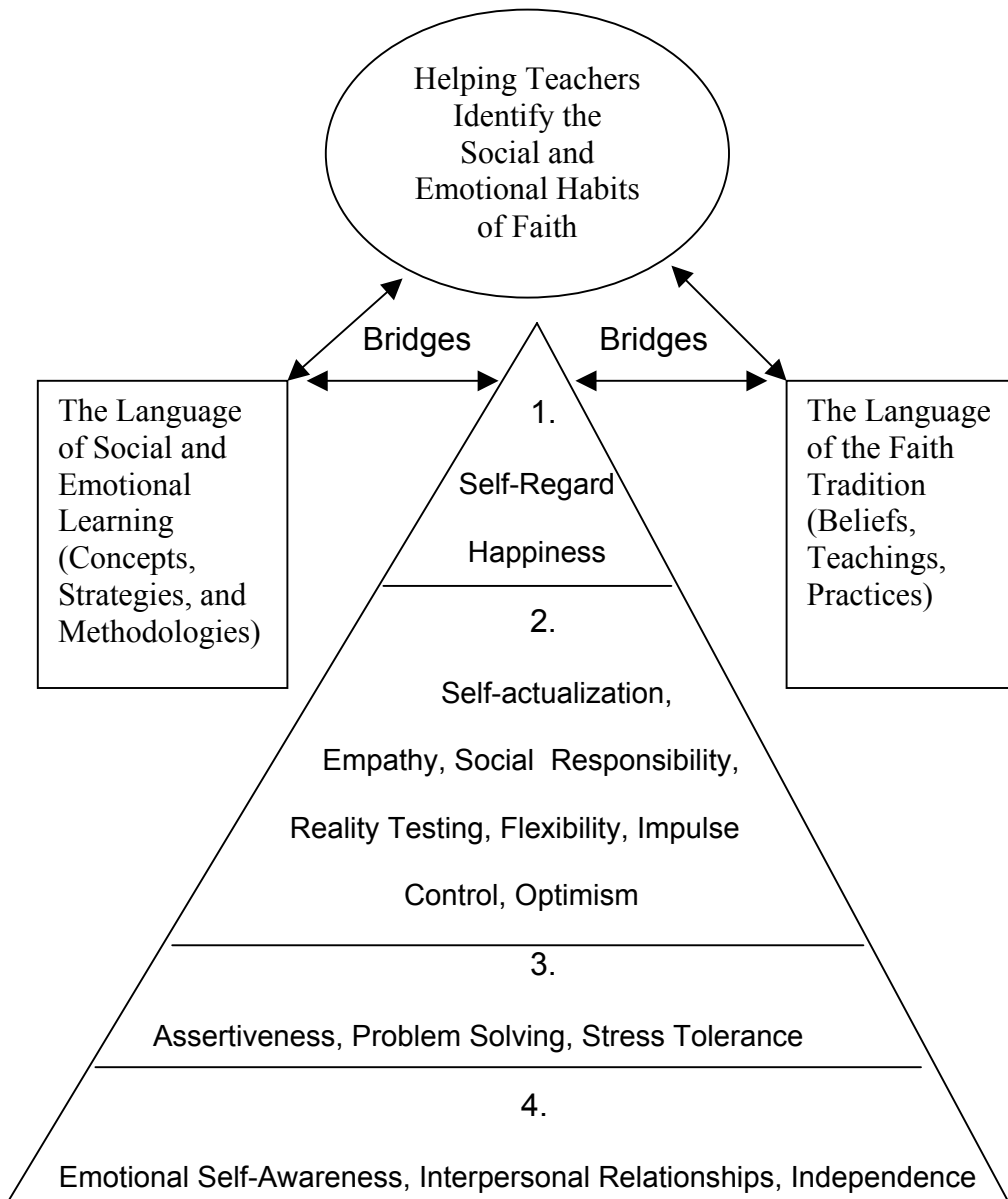
But, although educators, parents and students recognized intended outcomes of faith formation in these constructs, the actual correlation between an individual construct and a specific element of the Christian faith tradition was not always apparent. In the following table, 12 school teachers studied over a one-year period were asked to evaluate if religious faith would help to develop each of the EQ-i social and emotional skills. They were also asked to identify a specific belief, teaching or practice that would speak to the development of that competency.

**Table 2: Teachers Responses to the Role of Religious Faith in Developing the Social and Emotional Skills Measured in the EQ-I**

SEL Construct	Does religious faith help a person develop this skill?		Can the teacher name a specific religious teaching, belief or practice helping to develop this skill?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Intrapersonal Scale				
1. Emotional self-awareness	7	5	4	8
2. Assertiveness	10	2	8	4
3. Self-regard	12	0	8	4
4. Self-actualization	11	1	9	3
5. Independence	9	4	4	8
Interpersonal Scale				
1. Empathy	11	1	7	6
2. Interpersonal Relationship	8	4	5	7
3. Social Responsibility	11	1	5	7
Adaptability				
1. Problem Solving	10	2	8	4
2. Reality Testing	11	1	8	5
3. Flexibility	11	1	10	2
Stress Management				
1. Stress Tolerance	10	2	10	2
2. Impulse Control	11	2	10	2
General Mood				
1. Happiness	12	0	9	4
2. Optimism	11	1	10	2

The responses indicate that teachers in the sample were more likely to see the theoretical connection between the goals and objectives of SEL and religious education in areas of self-regard and happiness. All of the teachers believed that religious faith helped in the development of these skills, although some of them had a difficult time naming religious teachings, beliefs or practices that helped in the development of these specific social and emotional skills.

A diagram of these findings suggests a working hypothesis on the social and emotional skills that seem most pregnant with religious significance to teachers. Figure 1 suggests an organizational strategy for creating a process to deepen educator awareness of the social and emotional habits of faith in religious education.



**Figure 1: The Relevance of SEL Constructs to Faith in the Perceptions of Middle School Educators**

The farther one moves down the triangle, the less likely educators may be in recognizing a correlation between the faith tradition and the SEL skill or competency.

The constructs in section 1 of the triangle make reference to the psychic experiences that elicit and maintain positive feelings about myself, and life in general (self-regard and happiness). The EQ-i constructs in section 2 refer to the psychic experiences that give me control over the forces of my inner life (self-actualization, flexibility, impulse control, and optimism); and empower me to become involved practically in the concerns of others (empathy, social responsibility, reality). The EQ-i constructs in section 3 make reference the psychic experiences that give me strength

to stand up for what I believe in (assertiveness), respond practically to the challenges in my life (problem solving), and handle the unpleasant body sensations needed to tackle the harder things in life (stress tolerance). Lastly, the EQ-i constructs in section 4 refer to the subtleties of awareness needed to decipher those psychic experiences creating bodily sensations (emotional self-awareness), the subtle dynamics of relating to others (interpersonal relationships), and the freedom from emotional dependence to have self-controlled and self directed thinking and actions (independence).

Figure 1 may help to explain the negative evaluations many religious educators give to in-service efforts on spiritual development and faith growth. Catholic school principals and directors of religious education have often complained that Catholic schoolteachers are resistant to many of the faith development programs offered by religious educators. Many of these programs take their goals, objectives and methods from retreat movements, which promote faith sharing through exercises in emotional self-awareness, interpersonal relationships and the emotional blockages to self-directed and self-controlled thinking and acting. Figure 1 suggests bridging the languages of the faith tradition and social and emotional learning is more likely to resonate with teachers if self-regard or self-esteem and happiness are addressed first.

#### *The Four Factors Pregnant with Social and Emotional Potential*

The data gathered Belleville studies surfaced four critical sets of issues that must be considered in the construction of a theory on the role of emotion in religious education. In one form or another, all four of these streams were present in the data from each of the teachers in the one-year study. Teachers had divergent thoughts on the nature, purpose and influence of the sets of issues, but considered them important to their ability to engage their students with the social and emotional dimensions of a faith tradition:

- 1) *The teachers' own past and present social and emotional faith formation experiences.*

The teachers identified several factors that seemed to have the most impact on their own emotional intelligence and their sensitivity to the social and emotional dimensions of faith and religious education: childhood experiences, influential religious leaders, and the teacher's sense of "vocation as a religious educator." In addition, certain habits of thought also exerted strong influence on the teachers' ability to recognize the relevance of emotional intelligence competencies for the life of faith. Such habits included thinking patterns teachers used in identifying the presence of God in their life, the proverbs and aphorisms they used to bring meaning to the good and bad events of the day, and the "feelings" of right and wrong that guided their moral discernment. These factors seemed to set parameters on the educators' ability to act and react to social and emotional "teachable moments."

2) *The teachers' personal skills and competencies for presenting the faith tradition's social and emotional perspective.*

Teachers needed proficiency in certain skills to maneuver with their students through the subtle processes of presenting the affective content of the Christian tradition. These skills included self-knowledge and the ability to deal with the affective issues of the adult world, especially the teacher's own struggles. An important skill and practice was also having deep faith discussions with significant people in their lives.

3) *The teachers' educational skills and competencies.*

This set of issues included a sense of the practical or sapiential significance of religious doctrines, the ability to make sacramental connections to teachers' own lives, as well as their students, and a sensitivity for analyzing student social and emotional issues. In addition, teachers needed distinct classroom methodological skills, especially the ability to use the question as a chief tool in passing on faith, and a sense of the unique challenges of teaching a religious tradition.

4) *The structural issues and political relationships that influence teachers' ability to present religion from a social and emotional perspective.*

From the teachers' perspective, the more critical influences affecting their ability to identify and teach the social and emotional habits of faith were the overall school environment, teacher relationships with parents, and the established religion curriculum that was suggested in lesson plans and activities from the religion textbooks.

### *Conclusion*

In order to present the social and emotional habits of faith in an engaging fashion, it seems educators need two broad levels of teaching competencies. One dimension deals with the social and emotional skills that are required of any SEL educator: self-knowledge, analytical skills for studying the social and emotional competencies of students, and a relatively sophisticated language for discussing the inner world of their student. At the same time, educators need to be able to identify their own social and emotional struggles, and have a sophisticated language for the nature and purpose of affect in religion and life.

Secondarily, teachers need certain classroom skills. The competencies surfacing as having particular importance were: a sense of the unique challenges of teaching religion; an awareness of the social and emotional competencies that are most closely related to religious faith; a strong sense of educators' own intuitions on teaching from and to the heart, and questioning skills. These dimensions seem to provide a practical foundation for creating a grounded theory on the connection between social and emotional learning and religious education.

SEL researchers and educators have a lot to teach religious educators in an effort to heighten the affective dimension of religious education. For instance, developing refined skills in questioning and probing, which is a key pedagogical tool in social and emotional educational practice, is difficult for most educators.

SEL educators have also found the skills required for proper planning and execution of an affective curriculum are complex and difficult to learn and implement (Beane, 1990). Among other things, adding affective elements to the curriculum requires a thorough discussion of the educational environment's "hidden curriculum," because implicit rules and norms carry some of formal education's strongest affective dimensions (Miller, 1976). The data gathered for this study found that Catholic religious educators had spent little time discussing with colleagues the hidden messages embedded in the structure of the classroom and school environment.

SEL research suggests a religious education focusing more intentionally on a "discipleship of the heart" (orthopraxis) will have different challenges than a religious education emphasizing a "discipleship of the mind" (orthodoxy). The emotional and social elements of faith are less easily given to direct instruction and require constant reinforcement and re-learning. This reality is addressed in the emotional intelligence literature in areas that speak of the students' need to "overlearn" their social and emotional skills (Elias, Weissberg, Dodge, Hawkins, Kendall, Jason, Perry, Rotheram-Borus, and Zins, 1994, pp. 268-316; Elias and Tobias, 1996, p. 16).

In many previous generations, "overlearning" the social and emotional dimensions of the religious tradition was accomplished through social reinforcement of *three* support pillars occurring outside formal religious education: the family, the faith community, the culture's support of many religious values. Many of these supporting pillars of formation have eroded significantly in the past 50 years, and the affective content of the tradition must now become more *intentional*.

Nearly thirty years ago, Carlo Carretto spoke in reaction to a cognitive-oriented religious education:

The mounds upon mounds of catechisms that have been turned inside out in our parishes and chewed over in seminaries have helped to produce the present crisis in which everything is known about Christ and about the Church, but no one any longer believes either in the Church or in Christ. The catechism, without life and without witness, is like medicine given to a dead person ... Jesus came to bring fire not the catechism to the earth. (Carretto, 1996, p. 133)

It has become clear over the past 40 years that religious education needs both fire and facts if it hopes to effectively pass on a faith tradition. Given new knowledge on how the brain learns, the importance of keeping emotion and cognition in a creative mix has never been more critical. A postulate of this study is that an SEL perspective could help many religious educators to identify and present the *fire* in the *facts* of their faith tradition, to see the wisdom of the tradition in light of their own personal needs and social and emotional skills. Many program developers with an SEL emphasis are creating secular programs that look suspiciously like the *social and emotional habits of faith* contained in the teachings and practices of religions. A



sustained dialogue between religious educators and these practitioners may go a long way in helping religious education enflame the facts of our ancient traditions for the next generation of believers.

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