

Chain



## “Creative *Tension* as Links of Meaning: Investigating Religious Literacy Truthfully”

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### ***Abstract***

Metaphors are important teaching tools since they help ground and communicate our thoughts better. They usher forth a more concrete understanding by fusing the critical mind’s eye with the practical heart’s vision. Throughout this paper, the reader is invited to consider one organizing metaphor: links of a chain. This metaphor serves to better ground the author’s argument that employing creative tension in the field of religious literacy yields accessible truth. What is meant by investigating religious literacy is the need to test and critique the Roman Catholic tradition of its self-understanding of itself as a human organization working through real human life in all its meaningful messiness. The paper’s working methodology is to frame this creative tension as an organizing catalyst in the philosophy of curriculum in order to stimulate valuable dialogical inquiry and even some worthwhile controversy.

We have got on to slippery ice, where there is no friction, and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal: but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

In the New Testament we have diverse aspects held together in creative tension: these tensions are not of themselves signs of fragmentation but of a dynamism whose inner spirit remains one. The whole New Testament is a product of a long maturation process.

– Michael Fahey, "Church: The Contemporary Context of Ecclesiology"

### **Background & Introduction**

Living amid a post, post-modern culture ridden with exhaustive rhetoric and digitized skills, the religious thinker finds herself seeking dialogue not in genuine *aporia* (intellectual and ethical creative tension), but rather in insufficient secular models of bulk, uninspiring, illusory data. In short, an inadequate religious literacy is employed since the complicated world we live in and have our being is not sufficiently tapped into. I propose that to better access daily religious literacy as a means of seeking truth, one must simultaneously dive and soar to levels of meaning in alignment with emergent, friction-filled tension. In other words, if a religious literacy does not account for the realistic snags inherent in a meaningfully complicated human dialectic, it becomes a *fiction*, illusory, esoteric, and thus false. In my approach, one is able to move towards a more sophisticated and real religious literacy by dialectically unpacking the human narrative amid the very creative points of necessary tension that define it.

And now, a quick quiz is in order...

Quick quiz: *What methodologically links the following ten people (whether dead or alive)?*

Heraclitus of Ephesus, Socrates, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Ludwig Wittgenstein, T. Howland Sanks, Paul Lakeland, and Michael Fahey? They are all *meaningfully* scandalous thinkers. Clearly, they do not believe the same things or in the same way. Six are Christian; four are not; four theologians and another smart enough not to be pegged down as one; three philosophers; four mathematically trained; still others uncertain what to call themselves. Nevertheless, all of them are absorbed in the content and power of dialogical language and duly cognizant of this fact. More specifically, they work amid the boundaries of thought, and such boundaries are real, tension-filled ones. These thinkers nimbly dance on the borders with a similar methodological paradox: an unrelenting grip that permits and privileges creative dosages of tension to seep into their work. Such thinkers are meaningfully scandalous because they encourage tension as the means of a true (real and just) dialectic of insight and growth of thought with others. Now, we are ready for our root organizing metaphor: *links of a chain*.

Chain



Think of a long, heavy, iron chain with countless links. You can separate each link and lay them individually on the floor. However, in this way, they remain useless. The only reason you would remove or add some links is because the chain is longer or shorter than you need it to be, whether a sailboat chain, jewelry bracelet, or keychain. Interestingly, we do not have any name for the individual pieces of the chain except *links*, even when they no longer serve that specific function. It seems chains are only constructed and predicated of in relation to a function of linkage and none other. A chain is a utilitarian prop. Creatively, through its utility, it can be refashioned into a thing of beauty and rich meaning (material or immaterial: necklaces, chains of being, chains of love). The utility of a chain lies in its taut links. There is tension **in** the link because tension *is* precisely the link itself. Tension brings the links together to anchor the sailboat, stylishly encircle the wrist, or prevent lost car keys. Perhaps tension also has an ecclesiological linkage function for us today – connecting us to one another and thus God by embracing the unavoidable, meaningful messiness of our human existence. I assert it does, and I think our religious literacy must reflect it in order to be real and truthful.

### **Structure of the Paper**

Considering the chain metaphor above, I critique the Roman Catholic tradition of its self-understanding of itself as a human enterprise in order to frame this creative tension as an organizing catalyst in the investigation of a meaningful religious literacy and its link with curriculum. I begin by naming three current points of tension in the Roman Catholic tradition while arguing how these points should be embraced with creativity in linking the church's self-understanding of itself to the best of what church means today. Next, I investigate some current secular and religious education literature (as well as resurrect and refashion some past wisdom) to elucidate that today's curriculum must meaningfully tackle the complex questions, desires, and human spirit to make it relevant to real human living. Specifically, I review three presuppositions of how curriculum is often viewed today and juxtapose them with the visions represented by secular educator Elliot Eisner and church educator Maria Harris; I then argue

what I consider valuable implications for both secular and church curriculum design. I close by arguing that a sophisticated, modern curriculum should privilege a creative tension combination of Socratic inquiry and Cartesian skepticism in order for it to be a true learning experience of real human living. In this last section, I also challenge what I consider a significant shortcoming of John Dewey's educational methodology, namely his omission of the valuable educational project of intentionally creating *creative* problems.

### Three Points of Tension

Below I name three points of tension in the church in the form of three related questions.

**(a) The Question of Tradition:**

*How does today's Church embrace its fidelity to the apostolic mission Jesus preached nearly 2,000 years ago in Palestine while also being sensitive to the reality of modern sensibilities?* This question is not an irrelevant one. It is one that invites us to develop living and meaningful responses to the practical need of squaring universals with everyday particulars. It is an Aristotelian challenge to re-fashion our working hypotheses in order to preserve yet augment the living Church as a human enterprise.

**(b) The Question of Hermeneutics:**

*How can the Church embrace the dire need and rich blessing of re-fashioning new 'ecclesiological' voices in preaching the Gospel today?* A Church that does not recognize the need to address change is an aborted Church – cut off from the lifeblood of Christ. Innate to the idea of *ekklesia* is the act of living as a community of place, time, and significance. Change is inevitable and futile to ignore. To embrace it with some careful critical distancing is the true response to live as Christians in today's world. I maintain that such an act of living in community also brings us into fuller communion with the living Christ as Emmanuel, God among us. And this is a living link of creative tension and also hope.

**(c) The Question of Human Narrative:**

*How does the Church appropriate the valuable lessons of humanity in seeking God's Kingdom?* As William Dych, SJ noted, the 'Kingdom of God' is not the same as 'The Church' (1999). The error of divinizing the Church rather than humanizing it sets the stage for a host (no pun intended) of problems regarding what we mean by 'Church' as an institution and missionary force. It also has huge implications for obfuscating truth since a religious literacy becomes sidestepped.

### Creative Links of Meaning

I now respond to the above three points.

**(a)** There is tension **in** the link because tension *is* precisely the link itself. We are a fragmented Church because we are first, a fragmented people. The primal thing to acknowledge is that the 'Church' is non-existent without the people of God. My first grade teacher, Sr. James Maureen, G.N.S.H. was correct: "The Church is made up of the people of God; the building is simply where we come together. If the building burned to the ground, our living Church would still remain." (It took me some twenty years to really *see* what she meant). At the very heart of the Church is humanity. How does today's Church embrace its fidelity to the apostolic mission

Jesus preached nearly 2,000 years ago in Palestine while also being sensitive to the reality of modern sensibilities? It does so by working to **be** Jesus in our actions: politically, socially, religiously, sexually, economically, and relationally with others. For Joseph Komonchak, ecclesiology and social theory must be interlaced amid seeming incongruence (1981). One cannot develop a meaningful ecclesiology without also embracing critical social analyses in order to root the Church in *this* world. I think his point makes good sense. What kind of person was Jesus? What traits can I re-fashion into my personhood today rather than super-impose from a Jesus living in a historically and socially different time and place? It is none other than the call for a meaningful social hermeneutics of today. It is life-enduring work that promises life-eternal peace. It is a daily call to respond to body and consciousness, to arise in the morning and retire in the evening having kept Jesus' humanity and not only divinity in our working heads, hearts, and hands and to meaningfully appropriate this lesson to our re-transformation.<sup>1</sup> It is to live through Him, with Him, and in Him in loving, meaningful tension. The entire mission of Jesus and the Church is the same: to creatively balance the 'un-balanceable' – to live in paradox – to ask of the world a peace it cannot give and then forgive again and again.

Jesus' entire social ministry on earth was a paradoxical, meaningful proceeding: seeking an *inhuman* attained goal by living *in* humanity. Jesus is the best example of faithfulness to apostolic mission. Was he not acutely aware of the immanent tensions in His place, time, and location (geographically, politically, and culturally)? After all, these tensions are what brought Him to Crucifixion by his friends – the ultimate tensive link to God by brokenness of our human sin forever. A huge caveat is in order though. Should we speak the same words, complete the same actions, and challenge the same ideologies as Jesus did in our modern world? No, I do not think so, and not because it is not prudent. We already recognize that genuinely striving to live Christian lives must often go beyond prudent measures, since Jesus' own model identified salvation through real human tension and often impropriety, thus making Jesus the real, necessary yet unwelcomed love in the world. We should follow the same mission but operate within our own creativity. The Church today in the Bronx is neither ancient Palestine, nor is the weather, social customs, food, education, political veins, or economic strata. The question of preserving tradition is only applicable and realistically reasonable if we embrace the permeating tensions that conflict us today and not yesterday alone. We learn from yesterday's ecclesiologies of how we have become church and work to re-understand our self-understanding of ourselves. However, we must also step into the ambiguity that is humanity itself to gain a fuller understanding of ourselves for and with others in Christ today.

At the Papal celebration of the start of the second millennium, John Paul II invited us to: "Open the Doors to Christ" (quoting *Romans* 39). Once opened, the path is laden with tension and conflict, but also meaning and salvation. Not only is the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('there is no salvation outside the church') a tension to wrestle with for today's Church in acknowledging our need for pluralistic community and dialogue amid preservation of tradition, but it is one that historically erupted from our own Church itself. Like mighty icebergs, we recognize that tensions are even internally present and looming below the surface. We should not forget this. The ancient Greek notion of benefiting your friends and harming your enemies is a false dichotomy for us today, thank goodness. Or is it? Do not some people continue to arrange 'living' bifurcations among other social, religious, economic, and cultural groups? We need to unpack Christianity by opening up the brokenness and fragmentation of a people divided.

We need to break open the dialogue for much needed criticism and place our thoughts adjacent to the modern world we live amid for purposes of critical distance. The living Church is a human organization, and because of that, it must deal with tension. That is a given. The challenge and invitation is to deal with it in either dismissive closed responses, or open, critical, reflective, dialogical responses that acknowledge tension and use the tension to unite the links. In alignment with T. Howland Sanks, the responsive models of *ignoring*, *restoring*, and *deploring* falsify the present wisdom narratives of contemporary human experience since they do not embrace the tensive need of reality: critical and constructivist engagement of church and culture in meaningful dialogue (1998).

**(b)** A Church that does not recognize the need to address change is an aborted Church – cut off from the lifeblood of Christ. Christ came to serve and not be served. So, too, are we called to be Church for one another. The entire spirit of Christianity can be summarized by one social act: Jesus washing the feet of the disciples (cf. John 13:23). When we do not address the other *as other*, we do not meaningfully address her as Christ did. So, how can we be Christ-like if we deter from this lesson? We cannot. How can the Church embrace the dire need and rich blessing of re-fashioning new ‘ecclesiological’ voices in preaching the Gospel today? I expand this metaphor of washing one another’s feet to address the needs and thoughts and spirit of the other *as other*. When the Church does not listen to new, emerging ecclesiological voices, the Church cannot best preach and live the Gospel in action. The needs of the Church are not limited to physical or monetary ones alone. The ‘cries of the poor’ come in the dress of Wall Street bankers and political officials, in religious educators and little children, in marginalized women and Hispanics, the educationally impoverished, the prep school privileged, and the psychologically depressed. Listening, *really* listening, to the other *as other* is part of Jesus’ social ministry as Church for one another (Sanks 1998). Not only is the call to respond necessary for community building, but also a rich blessing since we have meaningfully tapped into a whole reservoir of imagination, creativity, and visage of God’s best creations – us. The voices must be heard and must be heard **often**.

Language is the conduit to intelligibility, for it structures how we see the world and thus makes it relational to others. To accomplish a meaningful, living Church with others, one must absorb oneself in the interdisciplinary medium of hermeneutics yet critically distance oneself at the same time. Checking your mind in at the church door is exactly what the Church does not need. To do so would relegate the Church into a mindless, heartless entity. That would be the exact opposite of what Christ calls us to be. Christ calls us to be fully alive in our humanity in glory of the Father. Employing all the gifts of God’s creation of humanity is a further thanksgiving to God, intellectually, heartfully, socially, sexually, politically, and the rest. For theologian Paul Lakeland, all doctrines, beliefs, ideas, and metaphors gain vivacity as a result of being shaped by a time and place (secular: ‘of a time’) (2003). A sort of secular locality positions us in a place and time with others, not simply of a geographical spot, but of the place and time of a human people longing for meaning with God through one another. To deny them of a voice is to stifle the Gospel message rather than embrace and share it. We must listen to one another, critically and intensely, to value our Church and work towards its modern meaningfulness. We must be like Jesus who patiently and lovingly sat with the children and opened up the Gospel message to them amid the tension and paradoxes of life. The meaning is **in** the tension. The love is richest **in** the tension. The call for Church must respond.

The formation of Church is to perpetually strive to live in the ambiguity of paradox – to actually desire and long, to hope for an incomplete and puzzling reality with others and God. I never knew a committee I sat on, class taught, student counseled, service project worked on, or a liturgy shared in that did not somehow work to transcend meaning from the plain and ordinary to the ornate and extraordinary, even if we did not reach this aim. We are simply not satisfied with the way things are whether on television or in our careers, or in our ways of being Church. I consider it a good thing. It is because our appetite for ultimate meaning is what drives us as paradoxical beings, not merely chronological and legal beings. Not only does God work through God's people, but also God's people work to glorify God's name. Humanity becomes mingled with the Divine and must be so. The young child Jesus speaks to in the Gospels is the one whom rests on Jesus' lap awaiting a new uncovering of reality. It is the child that concentrates with ardor and critical passion. The child is both detective of the human spirit and reveler in wonder. To a young child, much of what he sees, hears, and experiences on a physical, psychological, rational, athletic, and spiritual level is novel. It serves as a springboard for a present but incomplete, *not-yet* reality of ultimate meaning. We are called to listen to one another not merely out of habit, but of engagement and commitment to transcend to unity by means of tension. That is the creative part.

(c) What are the characteristics expected to be found in fully alive human beings? This is a simple interrogative. Yet, its dimensionality of questionable content and varied interpretive lenses and contexts makes one's response less of a systematic closed-off answer and more of a disclosing portal into one's living human narrative powerfully speaking to all. In *Metaphysics I*, Aristotle stresses that "all human beings, by nature, desire to know." This is a potent statement, for taken word-by-word it consists of six huge topics: universality (all), domain of living (human), mode of living as existential function with others (beings), placement and everyday function in the cosmos (nature), emotive response (desire), and the self-defining perpetual quest as human beings to investigate (seeking higher forms of knowledge). Since the fundamental charge we face as humans, for Aristotle, is to know (and I agree), I contend it is also the case that we continually strive to know more and more about ourselves as social inquirers in the context of living and being with others. Thus, our literacy must embrace our human context.

The *humanitas* anthropological vision is one that calls the Church to deadbolt the characteristics of the human spirit that celebrate love and growth with others by way of a passionate heart and passionate, critical mind. I agree with Sank's contention that as Church we should embrace the fact that we do not have all the answers and that we live amid ambiguity, polyvocality of creed, and that we need to embrace the messiness of human fragility (1998). While we must come to grips with our present world and human reality, we are not left defenseless or defeated. Rather, it is within our power to develop meaningful and profound respect for chaotic indeterminacy while seeking relevant connections to our present lives. We are not called to be God. We are called *to God*. Serving as examples for one another is really the only way in which we learn. Think about it. I may err in a moral decision involving human rights, business decision involving job lay-offs, or decision involving which entrée to order at a restaurant. Whatever the locality and circumstances, I judge my decision as reflective upon other human models of options I might, and probably should have, taken instead of the one I chose. If I do not privilege the *other* ones, I could not genuinely continue my day without taking some responsibility of

personal error in judgment. As human, thinking persons, we demand understanding, even if it may be provisional at times. When I consider other models of thinking as Church and their implications, I extend my thinking and thus my knowledge about the way other people operate in the world. After making a significant ecclesial decision, why do some Church officials often prefer to stop thinking about it and move on? Oftentimes, it is because they prefer not to know *that* they did not know something at the time of deliberation. Otherwise, it would now throw the entire decision-making schema into confusion. It would surface the tension. And what is so bad about that? If we stop there, it is bad. If we work through it, we learn and grow. We are rationally ‘comfortable’ putting electrical tape on a small plumbing leak when we consider it merely a temporary response. Provisional decisions, since provisional, do not occupy our heads, hearts, and consciences as much as final decisions. We do not really think the electrical tape will suffice for thorough plumbing in our homes. Rather, we view the make-shift approach as reasonable for the time being, a time that we know all too well cannot be extended for too long. But, sooner or later, we need to face the music, the truth. When we close off the *other*, as option, we close off our own human development as living Church. To be strong is to perpetually position the self amid others. It is to position the self in hopes of being altered in rich ways, whether through dynamic arguments or even the anxiety of a child. To reach out is the Catholic, Christian call to service, and therefore the call to love as Christ loves, as embedded in a human *altered* narrative. By loving, our human lives will be transformed. It does not matter *how* they will be transformed for the Christian. It only matters *that* they will be. As Augustine echoes, *ama et fac quod vis*, “love and do as you wish.” For the Church to be present in Christ is to follow Christ with an Aristotelian lesson: habituate ourselves in Christ’s love for others, and that will be our Catholic, Christian Church *telos*.

This *altered* ecclesiology becomes a pastoral vocation of God’s people and one entrenched and charged with mission. It is a beautiful reciprocity of nourishment for God and God’s people. I internalize our present Church as the expression of love as the *totality* of the faithful, for the faithful is none other than called by God to be living Christ for and with others as teacher (didache), healer (diakonia), brethren (koinonia), prophet (kerygma), and sacrificed victim (leiturgia) (Harris 1989). We witness community as a manifestation of living bread among a people, remembering that no everyone gets fed. These understandings intrigue and comfort me as an educator because they highlight the need for dynamic real people of God, a Church of humanity flawed and divine together.<sup>2</sup> Living among one another is indeed the *link*. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ noted, “nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.” We must work to *see* the link. To better do so, we now turn to curriculum ideologies and design.

### **Three Presuppositions**

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time.  
– John Dewey

Let us consider three underlining presuppositions of how curriculum is generally understood today. One cannot properly understand and re-design the environmental conditions for learning unless one first recognizes its present terrain. First, curriculum today is often viewed not as a ‘course to be run’ (*currare*: to run), but rather as mastery of a set of desired technical skills,

texts, competency levels, and objectives. While the aforementioned skills and objectives are important, I hold they should not be the only pilots of learning, for such a canon ushers forth a limited progeny of thought. Second, curriculum is often misunderstood to be (and therefore not properly distinguished from) a ‘schooling’ approach alone. We must note that ‘schooling’ is a subset of curriculum rather than its totality. If we view curriculum synonymous with schooling, then the presence and value of other ways of learning are not made explicit as laudable means of educating learners. Third, it is held by many that curriculum must be a unilateral endeavor, taught in the same ways so as to preserve the (supposed) integrity of the lessons and competency levels of the student across the globe. Among others, the main problem with this last presupposition is that it sequesters the process of learning to a domain of uncreative stagnancy, which is the precise arena true learning wards against by definition. That is tradition in the worst sense, rather than tradition in the sense of a legacy of meaningful critical re-appropriation of insights and viewpoints. In a serious sense, a unilateral approach is suicidal pedagogy – drawing the lifeblood from the human quest to learn. Next, let us consider current lenses of viewing curriculum, secular and religious (Walker and Soltis 2004).

### **Curricular Visions: Eisner, Harris, and Implications**

Curriculum theorist and designer Elliot Eisner understands curriculum as a course of studies run for a desired *telos* as an “achievement of certain desired end-states” (Eisner 2002). Eisner investigates three things: (1) what should be taught; (2) for what ends; (3) and for what reasons. He privileges an investigation of ideologies that help navigate the direction a school (a subset of curriculum and one he intentionally concentrates on) proceeds in seeking the desired goals it claims to value. It is noteworthy that Eisner does not assert that only one ideology permeates an educational direction. Rather, he holds that multiple forms of educational expression underlie schooling, curriculum, teaching, and evaluation. He is interested in channeling new directions for modern curriculum development by attending to a series of planned, intentional events that have educational consequences. Ideologies often operate in a latent fashion for Eisner, through implicative language and not explicative language alone, and such an underlining, subtle presence establishes embedded criteria for holding such ideologies. In other words, Eisner is not interested in setting up a defined locality for educational curriculum. Rather, he concerns himself with *re-defining* such localities to embrace the movement of human thought and interaction. (And human thought is nothing if not full of opportunities for creatively working with tension and inducing even more). For purposes of critical distancing, Eisner cites, among others, Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development as a strong example of how an underlining scientific model of seeking epistemic knowledge and intelligence categorization as the “desired end state” is privileged over an artistic and/or humanistic epistemological model in young people. As a result, according to Eisner, not only *what* we include in school curriculum is important to investigate, but also the *how* and *why* we maintain its positions of pedagogical prominence is to be critically investigated and meaningfully challenged. Since he values a re-defining of environmental localities to embrace the movement of human thought and interaction, he turns to ideologies. Eisner presents six curriculum ideologies that hold the most influencing prominence in schools today: (1) religious orthodoxy; (2) rational humanism; (3) progressivism; (4) critical theory; (5) reconceptualism; (6) and cognitive pluralism.



As an example, let us consider religious orthodoxy. According to Eisner, “one feature that all religious orthodoxies share is their belief in the existence of God and the importance of God’s message in defining the content, aims, and conditions of educational practice” (2002). The very belief structures strongly influence the way in which a curriculum is taught. As an example, Eisner notes the significant social justice element in Jesuit education where the principal accountability for the instructing of moral education lies with the teacher. Not only do we observe different belief structures at work between different religions, but also within different factions of a single religion. For instance, Eisner highlights the orthodox, conservative, and reform belief systems of Jews. For orthodox Jews, only select areas of secular life are allowed mingling. For conservative and reform Jews, there are more secular adaptations allowed. Since orthodoxies are held for the purpose of *shaping* others in believing certain ideologies that are first professed as indubitable truths, it is not unusual for orthodox fundamentalism to reject religious pluralism since pluralistic dialogue creates ambiguity and tension and thus not certitude of beliefs. It promotes *uncertainty*. But does not this unyielding position also hallmark an unyielding position in furthering the educational insights, creative tension, and imagination in people? This is a major argumentative question that opponents of religious fundamentalism hold, such as Eisner, and one I think is important to tackle for good reasons.

Eisner concludes that the aforementioned ideologies present a bifurcation between dogmatism and non-dogmatism. I consider there is often a split between religious believers who hold critical scrutiny to be a useless method since God is not fully understood by human rationality and to question is therefore blasphemous, and that of religious believers who value dialogue to work through their religious living to give it ultimate meaning. Yet, I think that such a bifurcation model is perhaps not charitable enough to either side. Clearly, one can see what side Eisner roots his feet, namely the non-dogmatic privileging of multiple voices of reason and dialogue, and I maintain allegiance to that side as well. However, what I propose as being more educationally productive in curricula is to cautiously skate on the border between the dogmatic truth holders and the human rationalists. When I enter a church, I do not want to check my mind in at the door. I want to fully absorb and soak myself in content and controversy, structure and periphery, the sacred and profane as sacredly profane religious living with others through, with, and in God. I want not just a God. I want One that keeps me interested in God’s goal because it is mine, too. In other words, if the plan is to structurally re-design environmental settings why not do so in a character that reflects real human thinking and doing in the world with others, that is bringing the tension forward in creative ways? As Dwayne Huebner often noted, teaching is inserting the human element (1974). As Gabriel Moran noted, “to teach is to show someone how to do something, how to choreograph a human body’s movement” (1997). What might this structuring look like? Let us explore it a bit further below.

Eisner mentions there are three types of curriculum that all educations teach: (1) explicit; (2) implicit; (3) null. For Eisner, the *what* of teaching deserves to be taught well (2002). This is the content that is explicit and right out in front of you. It is the curriculum that cannot be ignored, for it represents the data to be examined, the stuff to be made relevant *to* and *by* human inquiry. The implicit curriculum is taught indirectly (resonant of John Dewey), and the underlining questions of power play, legitimization, and access to such latent truth must be brought out into the open for Eisner if a realistic human curriculum is our goal. We must dust off the *what* and make it the *what is*, if you will. The null curriculum is a form of teaching that goes on but

paradoxically does not go on at the same time. That is, the meaningful absence of certain content (explicit and implicit) that gets sidestepped and/or conflated with other often subversive, intentional methodologies bears greatly on what, who, and why certain curricula are taught. For Eisner, reclaiming the subjugated image is an indispensable task for the curriculum re-designer of environmental settings. In other words, not only what is presented shapes a people, but also what is shrouded. The *what* arrives on the scene in many different forms. As the classicists know, silence may be golden but it also speaks volumes. And what is heard is the tension.

Eisner highlights two types of curriculum theory: normative and descriptive. 'Theory' is viewed as a set of ideas, intentionally abstract, which serves as an ongoing model for designing educational curricula. *Normative theory* addresses norms and values as an offshoot of John Dewey's idea that human growth fosters intelligence in relation to one's total environment. Normative theory is idealistic by definition, for it works to broaden the usual pathways of thought in welcoming an enterprise of enriched learning concerned with the realistic 'should/ought' combination of action rather than a fictitious neutrality of ideas. In short, every theory is a normative one, and I think every theory should work to creatively problematize. Next, *descriptive theory* offers us a conceptual language in designing educational environments by considering what 'is' rather than what 'should/ought.' It is the reality checkpoint or marker, a basis of realistic reference. It is important to mention that Eisner's presentation is heavily rooted in psychological, perspectival diction and, because of it, one for which some thinkers strongly criticize him. Eisner's model focuses on how practical ideas are transformed into opportunities for educational imagination where curriculum is the work of careful planning of educational settings for learning. This understanding is resonant of Dewey's view that we never educate directly, but rather *indirectly* by designing environments that maneuver the various climates where an 'aggregate of conditions' must be first named and then investigated to expose implicit, tacit knowledge claims. Interestingly, Dewey himself is guilty of reducing curriculum environments in relation to the 'schooling' domain alone. So, while his approach is laudable since it strives to name the environmental conditions for knowing, it unfortunately employs a limited diction of environmental relevance, if you will. Who is an example of a thinker that 'dusts off Dewey' by employing a richer understanding of human ways of knowing? Maria Harris enters the scene.

Religious education theorist Maria Harris hallmarks this approach of environmental curricular aims. Harris is concerned with structuring an environment in such a way that persons are intimately linked to the experience, wisdom, and tacit knowledge with others for the purpose of an enriched progeny of future growth and development. Environmental structuring is Harris' prime concern; educational texts are only to be used in so far as they further tease out this prominence of environmental structuring. For Harris, a curriculum educator must concern herself with a challenging mission: a "mobilizing of creative and educative powers" to shape and therefore fashion a people as an artistic expression of human life combining dialectical content and form (1989). While Eisner's presentation concentrates on school programs by intention, and Dewey's presentation by unintentionally sequestering all curriculum to schooling, Harris concentrates on how religious ways of knowing augment one's social dimensionality in learning with others beyond the classroom. My position is that such a religious dimensionality enriches even the secular curriculum, for Harris' religiously motivated methodology taps into these precise tacit forms of knowing and learning relevant to any kind of curriculum design. Whether

through a church or secular model, human learners learn by accretion, step by step, and therefore require a careful harnessing and mobilization of such creative human powers in resurrecting, erecting, and projecting bodies of ideas. (A secular thinker can be Trinitarian, too).

Maria Harris identifies five forms of church curriculum: (1) *kerygma*, proclaiming the word of the Resurrection; (2) *didache*, the forming process of teaching; (3) *leiturgia*, uniting in prayer to re-presence Jesus as sacrificial Christ in broken bread; (4) *koinonia*, formed community of fellowship; (5) *diakonia*, caring for and serving others (1989). It is noteworthy that Harris immediately contextualizes the value of these forms as tools of a living rather than stagnant church. She invites her reader to consider how the forms of church curriculum allow people to grow both in meaning and transcendence. For Harris, the human needs of the individual amid the community serve as the guiding principle by which the life of the church body becomes manifest in the spirit and fellowship of a living Christ. Life is the link for Harris, and the church becomes the primary focus of a living Christ as Emmanuel, God among us. Curriculum design that privileges a structuring of educational environments further situates the learning process as an overall human endeavor. It is one that continues to intrigue both religious and secular educational theorists because such an understanding highlights the need for dynamic people that reflect real human dimensionality of thought and action in the world – working with and through tension creatively. One can internalize Harris' words: "...We are the church, the fashioning of the forms becomes the fashioning of us..." (1989). Living is indeed the *link*.

In a church setting, according to Harris, the pastoral vocation of God's people is one entrenched and charged with mission. Not only are we united with God in a Creator:created relationship, but also in a prophetic and vocational mission to be in the world as living Christ for all of God's people. At the heart of such a calling is the human need to be with others in growth of mind, body, and spirit. For Harris, it is significant that our mission from God is one that calls us to be better Christians with one another in returning to the Father. She understands it as a beautiful, aesthetic reciprocity of nourishment for God and God's people. Whether one is a religious educator or secular educator, Harris' reading does challenge one to augment his definition of curriculum as more than schooling alone. Harris invites the theorist to consider the meaning of curriculum as remarkably alive and a missionary, vocational human form of being. Harris encourages the curriculum designer to augment even his specific point of entry into this entire discussion. That is, Harris criticizes that even church educators view much of church curriculum under the false identification of only one of its forms: schooling, complete with instructors and agendas for youth. She correctly notes that under this confined vision, curriculum is viewed as a canon of set texts, objectives, prayers, and individual and communal expressions of love as a *component* of the faithful. Harris internalizes church curriculum as the expression of love as the *totality* of the faithful, for the faithful is understood as none other than called by God to be living Christ for and with others in a dimensionality of human forms as teacher (*didache*), healer (*diakonia*), brethren (*koinonia*), prophet (*kerygma*), and sacrificed victim (*leiturgia*). According to Harris' interpretation, the very forms of the church are what sustain and challenge human persons to be meaningful and transcendent. Curriculum is not limited to texts and prayers. It is expanded into the living narratives of the people of God in outpouring word and life-filled action (and tension) of meaningful links. Even the secular educator must come to grips with such a thematic methodology, even if he does not adopt its religious motivations. What about the 'nitty gritty' of structuring such educational environments? How would Harris' forms speak to any

type of educational program in terms of embracing the human imagination and innate quest to learn more about its place in the world?

Harris investigates the multifarious dimensions of the curriculum of teaching as a repertoire of forms. There are teachers and lessons taught in classrooms, but not limited to classrooms. The curriculum of the church extends to settings of worship, service, fellowship, growth, and witness. The power of teaching must radiate to all such corners of contact with God's people whether in St. Francis Xavier Parish or IBM. The simple conversation is an opportunity for grace; so is the shared praxis of a community in an ongoing formation of spirit and body. For Harris, since we are called to God by the living Christ Who humbles Christ to share in our daily humanity, we are called to fully participate in our life source with fervor and thought. These are not strictly religious ways, but first and foremost *human* ways, and ones in which I maintain the secular curriculum theorist can also partake. Harris articulates that some people are more tactile learners and teachers than others, others more imaginative, auditory, personable, charismatic, abstract/conceptual, practical, verbal, or sacramental. I consider the benefit of these human collective realities is that we may utilize them all in becoming a more transformed and transforming body of thinkers, learners, and doers in the world with others. Since I am more often an abstract/conceptual thinker and doer, I make a conscious effort to permit these other opportunities for growth in my teaching repertoire whether in the classroom or while counseling students. I invite the ones I work with (students, colleagues, and supervisors) to all take part in reciprocal teaching and learning. Insights are invitations to grow better and deeper in meaning. Working to better receive such insights is the call to consciousness and love that allows us to be more fully alive in Christ with others. This is what creates community: teaching one another. Harris' model embraces such a daily truth. Let us tackle an example.

The curriculum of service, *diakonia*, becomes a formidable opportunity for growth as a people of God. Instead of limiting service to that of strict ministerial or pastoral activities (boards of directors, ecclesial teams, or committees), Harris invites us to view it as it could, should, and truly is: an outward profession of God's love here on earth. Service is what helps link the mind and spirit of God's people to the body of Christ. The heart of Christ is what continually gets outpoured to others. What particularly strikes me is the extraordinary impact service makes upon both served and server. At the crux of this impact is the soon-to-be inability to properly differentiate these two roles. I think that is the exact point with which we are called to reach and dwell. When the service *project* is viewed as a project, it misses the mark of what it is supposed to be and do: profess God's love with others. As a project, it becomes a tedious litany of chores and accomplishments to be highlighted on a checklist. The spirit of service is lost. What needs to be done is to fall into service as one falls into love: somewhat inexperienced yet willing, somewhat uncertain yet trusting, somewhat unexpected yet welcoming a change in you. Every June, I participate in a non-traditional curriculum design workshop. I travel with Fordham students to Aberdeen, Mississippi to grow with a group of fourth graders. In between the "unique" dining entrees and unrelenting mosquitoes is the calm beauty of a child yearning to answer this divine call of service, calling me into love with others through inexperience, uncertainty, and unexpectant dimensions – through links of creative tension. This curriculum lesson is what I continually re-learn once I return to the academic and social classroom of the Bronx. The buzz in rural Mississippi is not only of insects in the woods, but also great kids that provide me with a plethora of opportunities for love even when I *shoo!* them away at their

thoughtful 5:00 am wake-up calls. (Patience is a curriculum virtue as well). We are blessed to return to them to get infected again in love. Does not the secular educator rival such growth? I contend she does.

In summation, Maria Harris immediately connects the five forms of church curriculum to the human mission of active, engaged, and dynamic learning, solidifying what true education is all about: human transformation (1989). Through practical connections, Harris highlights the position of curriculum as an expansive tool for membership in a living Christ with others. She views curriculum as a vocation of profound acts of love that hallmark, sustain, and challenge further human growth and meaning. The dimensionality of responding to God's call is what Harris envisions as opportunities for fuller life – chances of mingling with the Divine through our humanity. Harris even offers us an alternative reading of the roles of traditional church curriculum in the evermore transformation of the living faithful. Concrete, experiential learning is a profitable way to connect the principles of a growing church curriculum with that of daily labors of love. Maria Harris' model views the human narrative as inextricably linked to the body of Christ without division, but rather membered and remembered as a series of planned and even unplanned events for human fashioning – the very best in privileging a creative tension linkage.

### **Socratic Inquiry, Cartesian Skepticism, and Dewey**

A critical methodology of both Socratic inquiry and Cartesian skepticism is in order for a given curriculum to be a true, human learning experience (cf. Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, specifically *Meditation One* concerning items called into doubt; Cress 1998). It is none other than a strict, prescriptive method to prevent taking falsehoods for truths—in my view, a task and challenge for secular and church curriculum design. This is the point where secularity joins hands again with religion as differentiation maker and identifier of error. Since both the secular and religious educator align in the mission of steering toward the truth, let us first be certain that our truth course of studies (curriculum) is carefully understood by first considering, in principle, the profit of approaching our implicit and null curriculum as not methodologically flawed from the start. I suggest starting out by using the wisdom of a critical, Socratic methodology of questioning linked with Descartes' principle task of avoiding error right below our intellectual noses. Such a dual role is necessary. Good education whether secular or religious requires this methodological strength. It will help illustrate how important the link of insight with respect to doubt remains for the curriculum designer of realistic and religiously charged forms of literacy. The method is mathematical, philosophical, secular, religious, and educational all in one. How, exactly?

Though excessive, such hyperbolic doubt outlines the quest for truth seeking. First, it clarifies the often unexamined foundations of erroneous thought. Second, it recognizes the need for a more realistic and practical evaluation of an asymptotic steering toward truth once continual revision of the system is privileged. Such a procedure is prescriptive of good method not only in secular, but also in religious education. Doubt and deception breed error for Descartes and therefore stifle progress of arriving at truth. However, I maintain a slightly different reading. It is the recognition of doubt and deception that actually permits true human learning to thrive in designing a realistic educational curriculum complete with snags and tares. Allow me to explain. In many ways, I do not think the modern educator can hold her own in the field without

subscribing to this *revisionary* methodology, namely one that thrives on pushing the boundaries and plausibility of a working curriculum. Education is none other than an implicit marker since it works to delimit the *legitimacy* of its field by further testing its own parameters and shortcomings. It is self-destructive in a real way. That is its main strength. Rather than restricting the process of learning to a domain of uncreative stagnancy, which is the precise arena true learning wards against by definition, a Cartesian based skepticism would constantly put a curriculum on guard of itself, too. In a serious sense, this approach would even hold itself in critical scrutiny. It demands a critical distancing of itself from itself. Sounds like a good method for the Church's self-understanding of itself to me. Does not a *bona fide* secular and religious curriculum need this methodological tactic? I think they do.

I maintain the true educator does not merely find herself interested in identifying error in order to avoid subsequent deception. She also specifically searches for error and the precise point at which it becomes manifest as error and thus requires revision. She works amid the implicit and null so as to make it *explicitly* implicit and *explicitly* null. Like good science, good educational curriculum continually works to re-orient its theses. That is its lifeblood – revision. Education is not doctrinal. It is a provisional realism. It serves as the springboard for an incomplete reality that posits, tests, and re-tests data (observed and inferred) for the purpose of both legitimizing itself as a theory and knowing itself a little bit better each trip and *trip-up* it makes. Employing Descartes' strict skepticism both theoretically and practically allows the curriculum designer to prioritize and privilege a continual suspicion at all times while doing his noble work. The educator concerns herself with the continual task of suspicion, but with very valid and considered reasons. The best thing about privileging such a bold skepticism is to see how much we can adhere to it before it becomes completely educationally idle and thus ineffectual in our working hypotheses. Doubt forces us to rethink our curriculum and to continue doing so. This is the hallmark of true curriculum design, namely to continually ascertain the scope of *itself* and therefore its plausible breadth as a means of investigating the human forms of learning. Sounds like a good method for the Church's self-understanding of itself to me. Now, let us conclude by giving Dewey a little responsorial air time, so to speak.

### Conclusion

As in Descartes, there remains a methodological bedrock in Dewey's work. It is the position that worthwhile education must be practical in scope, have human activity as its origin, and be responsive to the conditions that emerge from and encircle humanity. For Dewey, the purpose of education is to investigate the breadth of human life as an *ethos* of being and behaving in the world amid other people. Thus, there is a keen moral (metaphysically based) and democratic (practically based) dimension to his thought. Rather than designing curriculum as a self-reflexive endeavor (designing in order to design), Dewey urges us to employ educational tools in order to critically pinpoint and *dissolve* humankind's problems. This educational agenda is people centered for people's sake, not education centered for education's sake alone. Dewey articulates that education's ironic yet genuine task is to locate *itself* and clear up problems of imprecision and thus avoid potential hazards of future impoverished thinking. Good education allows us to articulate and critically steer through human problems (Boydston 1988; Welchman 1997).

Though I commend his approach, I witness a certain methodological problem in Dewey that my re-appropriated reading of Descartes' skepticism would meaningfully address. Dewey does not privilege the opportunity of educational curriculum to keep problematizing once the dissolving is done. This is where I dissolve my allegiance to Dewey, for his position does not satisfy me on either secular or religious education grounds. In omitting the valuable educational project of creating *creative* problems, Dewey's confined position further confines two more things: (1) educational curriculum does not get renewed by self-rejuvenation and thus approaches sterility; (2) educational curriculum risks the chance of not asserting any worthwhile pressure on religious belief structures and thus artificially distances the head from the heart and hands. For, I believe, religious education is none other than extending (by uncomfortable contortions) the boundaries of thought, expression, and daily ultimate meaning. The divine does not do religious educational literacy. I do. It is precisely my problem to clear up, first, by dissolving imprecise thinking, and second, by continually and meaningfully obfuscating it in order to reflect the complexities of daily life. I privilege critically problematizing more and more problems to create more creative and insightful problems, **not** less. And for each trip my curriculum makes, it also hallmarks ongoing *trip-ups* to be investigated in insightful, creative ways. This is the true dialectic of life's meaningful discourse for the secular and religious literate person – reveler in the links of creative tension.

The message of the Gospel and the call to faith do not refer to some eternal, spiritual realm unconnected with the men and women of earth and their problems. On the contrary, Christianity believes and proclaims the salvation of *this* world in Christ. In order to be able to preach the Gospel effectively, the church recognized its responsibility to understand the world and to address its real problems, hopes and longings.

– John R. Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology*

This historical fluidity and flexibility demonstrates that ministries arose in response to needs in the community at a particular time and, when the situation changed, some fell into desuetude. Such flexibility should continue to characterize the restructuring of ministries in our time.

– T. Howland Sanks, *Salt, Leaven & Light: The Community Called Church*

#### Chain



Think of a long, heavy, iron chain with countless links. You can separate each link and lay them individually on the floor. However, in this way, they remain useless. The only reason you would remove or add some links is because the chain is longer or shorter than you need it to be, whether a sailboat chain, jewelry bracelet, or keychain. Interestingly, we do not have any name for the individual pieces of the chain except *links*, even when they no longer serve that specific function. It seems chains are only constructed and predicated of in relation to a function of linkage and none other. A chain is a utilitarian prop. Creatively, through its utility, it can be re-fashioned into a thing of beauty and rich meaning (material or immaterial: necklaces, chains of being, chains of love). The utility of a chain lies in its taut links. There is tension **in** the link because tension *is* precisely the link itself. Tension brings the links together to anchor the sailboat, stylishly encircle the wrist, or prevent lost car keys. Perhaps tension also has an

ecclesiological linkage function for us today – connecting us to one another and thus God by embracing the unavoidable, meaningful messiness of our human existence. I assert it does, and I think our religious literacy must reflect it in order to be real and truthful.

Let us work to move towards a more sophisticated and real religious literacy by dialectically unpacking the human narrative amid the very creative points of necessary tension that define it.

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## NOTES

1. cf. St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1540. Ignatius privileged the notion that true love of God is made manifest through daily *works* and not only *words*. For Ignatius, the true People of God unite heart and mind, body and soul, and prayer and deed as a lifelong mission – a ‘labor of love.’ I read Ignatius’ ‘labor of love’ to be the modern equivalent of a tough love approach which is highly meaningful since it realistically defines practical life in all its true complexities, messiness and beauty interlaced.
2. cf. Michel Foucault often remarked how the issue of power reflected the way in which social groups operate in environmental, intellectual, ethical, and political arenas. Such thinking is also resonant of Pre-Socratic thought, namely the Ephesian, Heraclitus (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) who held that the constitutional function of nature and of *human* nature was one of constant flux and strife (νειςκος, tension). The power of the cosmos, exemplified in a state of constant tension, directed the activities of its inhabitants whether rocks, oxen, or human beings. The Church needs to creatively embrace this natural reality as well since it is first and foremost a human enterprise.

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