

**To Walk a Mile in the Shoes of the Stranger:  
An Integrative Approach to Social Justice Education**

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## **Introduction**

The Native American proverb declares that to know the stranger, we must walk a mile in their shoes. This image allows us to begin to understand the stranger by experiencing a story similar to theirs. We envision the context, the persons involved, the events that transpire, and the feelings that would erupt if we were to have a similar experience. However, we must bear in mind that while our journey of walking the mile may allow us to empathize with the feelings of the other, the two stories do not meld together as one. We can learn about the stranger, but they remain “other” to us; our shared feelings and experiences do not dissolve the distinctions that maintain our individuality.

Through the realization of a global community, we encounter more and more diverse peoples in our day-to-day activities. In these interactions with those of different religions, ethnicities, races, economic classes, etc., we must resist the urge to strip away the humanity of the person in pursuit of a common denominator. Frequently such dissolution becomes foundational under the oft misused rallying calls of a common humanity, common ground, or the common good. These benevolent concepts must be presented in a manner that preserves alterity while at the same time refraining from placing the dissimilar into a fetish-like status.

One approach lies in adopting a stance of solidarity, a posture that does not usurp the individuality of the persons involved. Though long-held as one of the tenets of Catholic social justice teaching, in order to realize its most comprehensive understanding,

we must begin with the humanity of the persons who are in solidarity. It is not enough to teach the relationship if one fails to understand the persons in that relationship.

By examining four questions: Who is the other? Why do I respond to him/her? How can I stand in solidarity with him/her? and, How can the religious educator help bring forth commitment to such a solidarity? this article will proceed with a vision for social justice that integrates philosophy, ethics, and a “shared praxis approach” to religious education. The philosophy of the *other* found in the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, preserves the distinction between the self and the other while at the same time intertwining them in such a way that self becomes hostage to the needs and welfare of the other (Lévinas 1978). Lévinas, therefore, is a rich resource for understanding the “Who?” and “Why?” of solidarity.

It is not sufficient to immediately convey this foundational philosophy in a religious education approach. To fully incorporate Lévinassian philosophy into an ethical way of being, relating, and responding, something more is required. The bridge can be found in the ethical triad of Robert Starratt. Starratt notes that ethics education often falls into one of two positions, an ethic of justice or an ethic of care. Starratt upholds the value in both of these, yet maintains that the two are not mutually exclusive; rather they are pieces of a whole. He proposes an ethic of critique, as the means of joining justice and care. An ethic of critique provides the piece to settle an otherwise unbalanced response. Starratt’s threefold schema attends to our third question, “How can I stand in solidarity?”

We are then prepared to attend to the religious educational approach that would best provide an integrative understanding of an ethical response rooted in the preservation

of alterity. The “shared praxis approach” as described by Thomas Groome is well-suited to this task. Its five movements provide opportunities for exploration of present assumptions, reflection on the present praxis that emerges from those assumptions, conversation with the faith tradition, philosophical foundation, and ethical paradigms, consideration and incorporation of new ways of perception, and finally, decision for action. The “shared praxis approach” aims to be transformative, a necessary goal if we are to appreciate the dignity of the stranger who remains “other” and through this transformation, to encounter and respond to God, the Absolute Other.

### **The Philosophical Grounding**

We must acknowledge that the phrase “to know the stranger” is somewhat of a misnomer when one considers Lévinas’ work as core to the current undertaking. To know is to enter into “an activity which appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known. (...) Knowledge is representation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain *other* to it”(Lévinas 1989, 76-77). Therefore, Lévinas claims, ontology is called into question because the other remains truly “other” to us despite any similarities exposed or data collected - we can never appropriate or grasp the *being* of another person. However the stranger does not remain totally unknown to us. Using the proverbial metaphor of “walking the mile” we can begin, through their narrative, to interpret mediated information “about” the other. “Comprehension of the other is therefore a hermeneutic, an exegesis”(Lévinas 1972, 31).

When we encounter another person, we encounter a stranger who is “other” to us. Despite our familiarity, they remain “other” because, in a Levinassian sense, “[T]he

otherness of the other does not consist in the fact that in comparison with me he proves to have certain features which typify him and not me” (Burggraeve and Bloechl 2002, 88). The tendency to reduce understanding of otherness to that which is not attributable to the self postulates the self as the standard by which the other is regarded - an egoist approach. This egoism presents a dangerous turn towards hierarchical ordering of people according to similarity resulting in the privileging and dismissal of not only individuals, but entire communities. To see this hierarchy at work, we need only compare the attention given by the US media to attacks on European trains and subways that killed *scores* of people with the disregard of the genocide in the Sudan that continues to kill *thousands*. The attack on people perceived to be more similar is treated with urgency while those who are viewed as “other” is regarded with a *laissez-faire* attitude.

The egoist approach is also detrimental in that it dehumanizes and objectifies the person before us by reducing them to attributes that can be neatly categorized. When we assign an other a label, we tend to make assumptions based on that assignment, assumptions that affect our response. As an item of categorization, the other is viewed as a dehumanized object bearing the presuppositions that determined the categorization and underlying our decision whether or not to respond.

If otherness is not a matter of the discernment of similarity, why is the other “other” to us? The other is “other” because the self and other are distinct beings in a state neither of comparison nor of opposition to the self. Lévinas notes that Western philosophy has been marked by a reduction of the other to the same (Lévinas 1979, 43). This reduction often results in a synthesis grounded in similarities causing us to relate

under the auspices of mutuality. Lévinas rejects this, “In relation to the other, there is no fusion: the relation to the other is envisioned as alterity. The other is alterity” (Lévinas 1999, 103) .

Understanding the other as alterity frees the self from egoism. It brings us out of a stance of “navel-gazing” that limits our concerns to our own desires. On the other hand, when we gaze outward, the face of the other irrupts, providing the opportunity to experience what Levinas would understand as being most fully human, answering “Who am I?” by recognizing and responding to “Who is my neighbor?” The concept of the “face” is, in Lévinassian style, complex. Just as the other cannot be reduced to dissimilarity, the face cannot be reduced to physical features. Face,

[m]eans from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself (Lévinas 1989, 82-83).

For Lévinas the face of the other is the abstraction and infinity of the other being before us.

The abstract face of the other beckons us to care for it in its vulnerability and, “holds us hostage” in responsibility (Lévinas 1978). It has this effect upon us because, “it is the locus of the Word of God” (Lévinas 1999, 104). Lévinas claims this because,

God is absolutely infinite and we can only come to recognize God, the Absolute Other, through the traces that God chooses to leave us - as in Exodus 33 (Lévinas 1972, 44).

The trace of the Absolute Other through the face of the other before us calls us from our natural inclination of egoism by irrupting into our experience with a call to alterity. This irruption of God is done in love and the only acceptable response, is to respond to the other before us in love, a love responsible for the other.

We are compelled to accept the responsibility to love the vulnerable face before us, “Thus, the presence of the face signifies an irrefutable order” (Lévinas 1972, 32-33). This responsibility is a commandment that must be obeyed, and may be burdensome, but does not impute guilt upon the self (Lévinas 1999, 106). Obedience to this commandment requires that we resist the tendency towards self-preservation that urges us, (as Lévinas states hyperbolically), to murder the other (Lévinas 1979, 37-39, 48-52, 70). The response to the other is therefore both prior to ontology (Kearney 1986, 21) and kenotic.

Through Lévinas we can reply to “Who is the other?” by stating that he/she is a person before us in alterity, not fused with our own identity, freeing us from our inward perspective, and retaining their full humanity. Grounded in this perspective, the answer to “Why do I respond to him/her?” is because in their vulnerable face, I see the trace of God, the Absolute Other who beckons me, commands me, and holds me hostage in an embrace of love.

## **An Ethical Triad**

Robert Starratt provides an ethical framework in which to situate these insights from Lévinas. This framework is threefold; it joins the ethics of justice (proposed by Kohlberg) and care (proposed by Gilligan) through an ethic of critique drawing upon the “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School. In doing so, we have a context that is “close enough to practice that it becomes a theory for practice” (Starratt 1991, 186). This is a key intent if we are to bridge the gap between philosophy and religious education and bring “faith to life”.

We must remember that, in light of our inability to know the other except as mediated through their story, that this ethical triad is no more than a hermeneutic tool; their story is not ours despite our engagement. The tendency to appropriate as possession rather than interpret as relationship offers a false sense of “knowing”. The ethic of critique insists that we acknowledge that “no social arrangement is neutral” (Starratt 1994, 47) and uncover biases that impede the human fulfillment of the other; even when those same biases are to our own benefit. Critique demands that the egoist inclination towards self-preservation be set aside in order to adequately uncover inequities.

Although the ethic of critique serves to uncover it does not adequately provide “the blueprint for reconstructing the social order it is criticizing” (Starratt 1991, 191). The ethic of justice serves this purpose, providing an explicit response to the inequities uncovered by critique. Further, justice is dependent upon critique because the ethic of justice, is unable to determine claims in conflict (Starratt 1994, 50). Justice, supported by critique, is a social affair, grounded in the practice of the community. The sociality of



justice requires that we uphold alterity to prevent a descent into self-serving perceptions of justice.

The ethic of care “does not demand relationships of intimacy; rather it postulates a level of caring that honors the dignity of each person (...) from a standpoint of absolute regard” (Starratt 1994, 52). Care is not simply the assuagement of the oppression of the other from immediate maladies (although that is a component); rather care, in its most complete sense, is to privilege the being before us in all their nobility with an attitude of complete kenosis of the self. Care is likewise dependent upon critique and justice; without the former it is superficial and without the latter it becomes an erotic response.

This interlocking ethical framework provides intelligibility to the philosophical foundation supplied by Lévinas that serves our purpose of transforming the understanding of the other and the responsibility that we carry for *their* human fulfillment. By considering the triad of justice, care and critique, we are able to offer a “richer response to the complex ethical challenges facing contemporary society.” (Starratt 1994, 45)

### **Why Solidarity?**

Before moving into a discussion of the religious education approach that would best suit the philosophical and ethical transformation outlined above, we should consider the concept of solidarity. Solidarity is derived from the French *solidaire* meaning “interdependent, interconnected, complete”. In common usage, solidarity has evolved to mean “standing alongside”. The etymology and common parlance evoke a sense that

implies more than one; a person cannot be interdependent or interconnected alone, nor can one stand alongside one's self.

Solidarity therefore is a posture that rejects the fusion of the persons (or stories) involved; it *requires* that there be an other. The other with whom we stand in solidarity is not an extension of the self, but a complete person. To quote the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Being in the image of God, the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone" (#357). Through the narrative of the other we can begin to understand how to respond ethically, grounded in a non-egoist critique of their circumstance, seeking justice for their human flourishing, and taking a stand with them in love and solidarity in full recognition of their human dignity and alterity.

### **Reconstituting Habits of Thinking**

As Lévinas noted, millennia of Western philosophy have inculcated a rationale that views the world through a lens that reduces difference in search of similarity as the foundation for relationships. This rationale can be reoriented through what curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner terms, "reconstituted habits of thinking" (Huebner 1999, 392). Religious education can rise to the occasion and transform our appreciation of alterity as the basis for relationships and social justice.

The "shared praxis approach" of Thomas Groome (Groome 1998) is a transformative process by which the persons involved not only become cognitive of information about faith matters but integrate it to such a degree that their lives are transformed into lives lived in faith. The five movements of the "shared praxis approach"

not only resonate with Lévinas, Starratt, and solidarity, they provide the means by which the three can be articulated into a cohesive schema that allows for paradigmatic modification of understandings of social justice. Each movement engages the participants through a dialectical hermeneutic exercise with not only the meta-narrative of the tradition, but their own narrative as well as that of others, respecting rather than subsuming all “stories”.

To move through the five movements (although Groome states that they are not necessarily progressive) (Groome 1998, 146) with an eye towards a reformulation of social justice education is to move through a reflection of what one might call an “applied theological anthropology”. The process invites people to articulate their present attitudes about social justice, the people with whom they interact in such activities, and the impetus to “do” (or not to “do”) social justice (movement one). This articulation serves as the foundation to enter into the critical phase (movement two), where the biases that are prevalent in both society *and* the individual are uncovered.

The story/vision of a faith community can then be presented in such a manner as to warrant the full dignity (and alterity) of the human person and the responsibility to other persons, (movement three). The preservation of human dignity and the responsibility to the other are firmly rooted in scripture and its prophetic calls for justice. With the landscape laid bare by articulation and critical reflection, the faith story/vision serves as the spiritual cornerstone for reconstituting ways of relating and responding. Participants in “shared praxis” do not engage in the movements in isolation rather, Groome envisions dialogue between participants, between individual and communal

stories, between faith and life as the stimulus for transformation (movement four) (Groome 1998, 141).

By the time one is prepared for the fifth movement of “shared praxis” Lévinas’ ideology of the self, the other, alterity, and responsibility will have been engaged, critiqued, and integrated with Starratt’s ethic of critique and justice. Movement five is a movement for action, a living of life embedded in faith and a faith animated in life. We can then, under the banner of social justice truly respond to the other, resisting the impulse to objectify him/her into categories of similarity/difference, upholding their human dignity in all its alterity as a person whose face holds us hostage in love and in which we glimpse the trace of God.

### **Implications**

Social justice cannot be a means of self-gratification, self-sanctification or self-preservation. When we, as religious educators wish to educate for social justice we must begin with a theological anthropology that keeps alterity sacrosanct and remember that knowing is the interpretation of a narrative that encompasses both the self and the other. When we consider an ethical response, we must remember that while justice responds and care honors, it is critique that uncovers. And, when we stand in solidarity we must remember that being alongside an other can mean walking the mile not in our shoes, but in theirs.

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