

## **Stories, Heroes and Silence: is there a place for wisdom in understanding faith in the 21st century?**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers the role of religious education in secondary schools run by faith communities in the postmodern situation of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It raises the place of wisdom in the search for a curriculum that addresses questions of meaning and identity for young people, and makes a case for the value of elements of the tradition such as story, heroes and silence. It also draws on the work of Robert Kegan and others to sound a note of caution about the danger of expecting too much of students.

‘a better postmodern future is to be found in the seriously recovered pre-modern past’ (Haldane, 1996).

### **The Challenge**

There appears to be a consensus that the cultural situation today in “western” societies, whether it is labelled postmodernity or something else, discourages a ready adherence to institutional religion among the young (and not so young) (Carrell, 1998 p. 15-17; Engebretson, 2001; Ludwig, 1995 p. 6-28).

This paper is concerned with the role of Catholic secondary schools in such a situation. How can they best serve a dual function of helping parents and the Church in the religious education of young people, and at the same time serve the needs of the young people themselves – especially their need to find meaning and identity? My views are advanced in the context of Catholic secondary schools in New Zealand. They are the views not of a philosopher or a researcher but rather of someone involved in designing an appropriate religious education curriculum. Some of what I have to say may be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to schools from other religious traditions in other places.

What can Catholic schools do to provide better alternatives for young people than the scientism, narcissism, nihilism and fundamentalism that seem to be the stances to life adopted by many of the young today (Alexander, 1999; Kay & Francis, 1996 p. 155; Ludwig, 1995 p. 16-28).

Though support for and attendance at churches is declining, at the same time people are still searching for meaning in life. Thus a Listener/Heylen Monitor survey reported in the Evening Post of 21/6/94, showed that in New Zealand the number of people who often thought about the meaning of life rose from 32 percent in 1985 to 49 percent in 1994. Answers to the age-old questions, ‘What is life all about?’ and ‘How should I live?’, are apparently still being sought by many.

For centuries in ‘western’ societies, answers to these questions have been supplied by philosophers, and by and those speaking for religious traditions – preachers, rabbis, teachers, theologians.

Both philosophy and religion were concerned with wisdom, that is ‘a form of understanding that unites a reflective attitude and a practical concern. The aim of

the attitude is to understand the fundamental nature of reality and its significance for living the good life' (Honderich, 1995 p. 912). Although there have been recent signs of a surge in popular interest in philosophy, the growth of philosophy cafes for example, it is fair to say that the academic discipline of philosophy has not been noted for some time for a concern for wisdom. The concluding sentences of the brief entry on 'wisdom' in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy (Honderich, 1995 p. 912), provides one explanation of why this is so, 'Although wisdom is what philosophy is meant to be a love of, little attention has been paid to this essential component of good lives in post-classical Western philosophy. It is perhaps for this reason that those in search of it often turn to the obscurities of oriental religions for enlightenment.'

Setting aside the presumed slight on 'oriental' religions, isn't this just the point? That those of us within the household of faith of what began as a (Middle) Eastern religion believe that the tradition derived from the original revelation does indeed offer us access to wisdom? Revelation after all means that things are not entirely obscure. The veil has been lifted to show a Way.

### **Light from Psychology**

While many philosophers seem uninterested in thinking about, or at least in writing about wisdom, Robert J. Sternberg recently gathered a number of psychologists from varying specialties, to contribute to a book on the origin, nature and development of Wisdom because, 'I came to believe that after years of being moribund, the field was experiencing a rebirth.' He concludes his preface to the book by writing that all the contributors 'hope that the current children of the world will grow up to have more wisdom than we have had: If they don't, there may not be a world in which their children can have the chance to have more wisdom than their parents' (Sternberg, 1995 p. x).

In the third chapter of Sternberg's book Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde maintain that 'to find out what we mean by wisdom at the end of the twentieth century is important, but it is not sufficient. No matter how advanced we think we are in terms of understanding the human psyche compared to former times, we still only have access to a limited cross section of the growing branch of knowledge. To ignore the hard-won insights of the past about issues that are vital for survival is like blinding ourselves on purpose out of false pride (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1995 p.25).

In their study of the psychology of wisdom Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde adopt a method they call 'evolutionary hermeneutics' which they describe as 'simply the name we have given to the attempt at reconciling what has been said in the past about certain important concepts with what is being said about them now within the frame work of psychological knowledge informed by evolutionary theory'. After considering the views of writers from Plato through to Kant, Nietzsche and Habermas, the authors conclude that the 'evolutionary perspective suggests that the ancient equation of wisdom and virtue is still viable and, in fact, that it is more relevant now than it ever has been. It can be argued that the various limits on objective perception and reasoning the social sciences have revealed – repressions, defenses, bad faith, false consciousness, ethnocentrism, conditioned responses suggestibility and so on – are precisely the concrete "particulars" of experience

that Plato argued the philosopher must overcome in order to see the underlying truth, and thus get closer to wisdom. They are also the parochial “interests” with which Habermas claims we must come to terms. So the accumulating knowledge about our imperfections need not paralyze us into helplessness: on the contrary it should help us make the right decisions with a clearer idea of where the obstacles are’ (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1995 p. 34-5).

This conclusion, it seems to me, should come as no surprise to those who believe in the divine origins of wisdom and in an anthropology that accounts for flawed human understanding and behaviour.

In a later chapter of Sternberg, entitled ‘Wisdom in a postapocalyptic age’, Michael J. Chandler and Stephen Holliday explore attempts to discover what wisdom might mean and how someone might become wise today. In reporting on the research of psychologists, including their own, into distinguishing wisdom from technical expertise, they follow the argument of J. Kekes to remind us that ‘becoming wise is not a matter of learning new esoteric truths but one of rediscovering the significance of old truths, that at some level, everybody already knows’ (Chandler & Holliday, 1995 p.121-41). They end their chapter by concluding that ‘wise persons may prove to be those who successfully peer through the gloom of our present dark age and recover some pre-apocalyptic vision of types of knowledge we have long since forgotten’ (p.140).

This line of argument from the field of psychology lends support to my view that it may indeed be legitimate and even necessary for teachers of religious education in Catholic schools to continue to mine the tradition for elements that can help students find meaning and identity. Or, in other words, to encourage them to seek wisdom. I will return to this point later.

### **A Caution**

Some argue that any attempt to retrieve meaning for young people through the wisdom found in the tradition is a lost cause because the postmodern condition means, by definition, a suspicion of grand narratives of which religious traditions are a prime example. See, for example, Lakeland (Lakeland, 1997 p.31-6 & 58-61), I wish to argue that there is at least one reason for religious educators to think very carefully before launching on a postmodernist course that may simply reinforce young people’s sense of confusion and lack of meaning, leaving them rudderless in a sea of ambiguity.

The reason for caution is related to the distinction between the cultural conditions referred to as postmodernity, and the philosophical standpoint called postmodernism. Here I am following an argument of Maureen O’Brien (O’Brien, 1999). Intrigued by the difficulty some of the supposedly postmodern, generation X third and fourth year undergraduate students were having in accommodating the postmodern character of her class in practical theology, O’Brien found in the work of Robert Kegan an explanation based on his researches into stages of consciousness (Kegan, 1994). Kegan claims that as people move to a new order of consciousness, they develop a capacity for abstraction and self reflection which allows them to stand outside themselves and view objectively the level they were at previously – something that was beyond them when they were still in the

previous order. In late adolescence a person might be expected to be moving from what Kegan labels the ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-modern’ third order to the fourth or ‘modern’ order. This fourth order is the level required to function well as an adult in today’s complicated society – to meet, in Kegan’s term, ‘the mental demands of modern life’. Kegan maintains that few people reach a fifth level order of consciousness he calls ‘postmodern’. He argues that ‘people grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge’, and that many cultures today are good at challenging adolescents but offer a ‘shameful lack of the sympathetic coaching appropriate to the gradual outgrowing of a way of knowing the world. The experience of challenge without support is painful. It can generate feelings of anger, helplessness, futility or dissociation.....’ (Kegan, 1994 p. 42-3).

In a telling passage cited by O’Brien, Kegan claims that:

‘no one should assign us the postmodern curriculum before we are ready for it. Nor does anyone do us a service by assuming that we understand it when we do not or are engaged in it when we are not. Those who understandably champion its merits, and who disdain the limits of modernism, might consider that before people can question the assumptions of wholeness, completeness, and the priority of the self, they must first construct a whole, complete and prior self’ (Kegan, 1994 p. 351).

The argument of this paper is that Catholic schools can, by drawing on the wisdom available through their tradition, lend support to adolescents engaged in forming an identity – in constructing a self.

Support for O’Brien and Kegan’s view that we can expect too much of students comes in recent research by Jeff Astley. Astley surveyed a group of 334 first year college students in an attempt to identify their ‘faith style’. The emphasis in the survey was on the three dimensions of openness, autonomy and questioning/reasoning. After analysing the data Astley concludes that, ‘Although in many of their responses these students seem to be post-modern, this could be because by temperament they are still partly pre-modern. They have not yet fully entered, let alone passed through, their own Age of Reason. As has been noted elsewhere, this whole movement may be a developmental matter and faith development theory itself claims that Stage 4 critical rationalism must be traversed before the mature post-critical Stage 5 can be entered (Fowler, 1988). At any rate, in life as in history we need to achieve a certain measure of rational enlightenment before we can go beyond it’ (Astley, 2000 p. 262).

O’Brien’s and Astley’s students were university undergraduates. O’Brien’s interaction with her classes led her to ‘distinguish the experience of life in a postmodern culture from a true postmodern capacity in these young people’ (O’Brien, 1999 p. 321). It appears that many of these tertiary students were not at a stage of consciousness to handle postmodern interpretations. All the more reason then for secondary school teachers to be wary of confusing their students with the intention of providing them with tools for deconstruction. Maybe what would best serve the needs of young people at secondary level in the fragmented

postmodern condition, are tools for integration rather than for deconstruction, or even the reconstruction that is more suited to their elders (O'Brien, 1999 p. 326).

As the psychologists quoted above suggest, some of these 'tools for integration' can surely be drawn from the wisdom tradition of Christianity and other religions. In the space left I will concentrate on three such tools; story, heroes, and silence.

### **Story**

One important 'tool' is undoubtedly story or narrative. If people are to find meaning in life they need consciously or otherwise to have a larger story or stories within which to place their own story (Rossiter, 1996). And this notwithstanding the postmodern suspicion of grand narratives. John Carroll has recently argued that western civilisation is dying for lack of stories:

'The spirit cannot breathe without story. It sinks to a whimper, deflating its housing characters, and condemning them to psychopathology – literally disease of the soul. So it is for the young in the contemporary West – teenagers, those in their twenties, the hope and pride of their societies – and with them, swathes of their more self assured elders. A malaise holds them in thrall, struggling to live in a present without vision of any future, or connection to even the organic tissue of being, their own personal past' (Carroll, 2001 p. 6).

Michael Warren's question, "Who is telling the Stories?" seems to me to be one of the most productive for religious educators or parents to ask when considering how the viewpoints and worldviews of children and young people are being formed. In 'stories' I include films, television soap operas and situation comedies, song lyrics and advertisements. Warren maintains that 'the dreams of the young do not just "happen" but are planned and produced by particular persons' (Warren, 1992 p.3). Warren makes a very good case for Catholic schools to give their students the means to take a critical stance, to raise their consciousness about the messages being fed to them through the information culture (p.47-8). I think that schools and parents also need to keep before children and young people the big story of Christianity as well as other stories from scripture and the living tradition which help them in a positive way to 'imagine the kind of person they wish to be' (Warren, 1992 p.3). In other words to help them form an identity.

The significance of the development personal identity and the issues it raises for religious education have recently been usefully explored by Graham Rossiter (Rossiter, 2001).

### **Heroes**

A second 'tool' closely related to that of story, is the importance of heroes. Traditionally stories are often about heroes. Young people need heroes, either real or fictional, to help them in their formation of identity. Some of the heroes or idols presented to young people by popular culture are of dubious value, not to say positively harmful. But consider the popularity of 'Harry Potter' and 'The Lord of the Rings', old fashioned stories of good and evil, of heroes and villains. John Carroll writes of the importance of the bedtime story ritual:

It was then that the world was given magical shape, the child identifying with the fairy-tale characters and mythic heroes, enraptured by the story in which it is Me who rides through the enchanted forest and kills the fiery dragon, Me whom the glass slipper fits. The spirit soars: there is a place, a mission, a way of living, the monstrously huge world outside not so daunting. Once upon a time' (Carroll, 2001 p. 9).

For Catholic schools the obvious source of stories of heroes and heroines is the lives of the saints. Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos explain why this is so. "Catholicism is not so much a history of ideas as a story of people, and the people we call saints are the heroes and heroines of that story. They are at once the paragons of Christianity and the paradigms of Christian living' (Rohr & Martos, 1989 p. 111-2). The ranks of inspiring men and women are not limited to canonised saints of course nor to the ranks of Christians. Alert teachers will find many other stories of heroes and heroines, both historical and contemporary.

### **Silence**

The saints are many and varied so they provide a range of models. What saints have in common is that they were prayerful. This brings us to the final 'tool' that Catholic schools can draw from the tradition to help students find meaning and identity today. It goes by many names; prayerfulness, interiority, inwardness, and meditation to name a few. Whatever it is called it is about enabling and allowing people to learn to 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46: 10). Whatever it is called no one should doubt its importance. In an article in Religious Education Jerome Berryman explores the link between silence and imagination and concludes that 'silence is necessary for human beings to communicate and create existential meaning' (Berryman, 1999). Berryman maintains that because our busy postmodern culture is in danger of losing the ability to learn through silence, religious educators have a duty not just to their traditions but to humanity at large to foster the ability to know in silence.

While communal worship and the other community dimensions of life in a school can and should be fostered, the element of truth in the oft quoted phrase of Karl Rahner that 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing' must be recognised.

In an article on spiritual life and the survival of Christianity, Louis Dupré writes:

'In the past religion was handed down by a tradition. But that tradition itself has lost its authority in the eyes of our contemporaries, including most believers. Tradition and society no longer define the ultimate meaning of their existence. Each individual is solely responsible for his/her attitude, instead of its being predefined by society or inheritance. Henceforth the believer is forced to become religious "from within". If contemporary culture is to be reintegrated it will have to be done by integrated individuals' (Dupre, 1998 p. 2).

Hans Georg Ziebertz in an investigation into the place of God in modern individualised consciousness recognised that 'the practice of religion is less and less founded in authority and tradition, but in religious people themselves.' In this

circumstance he finds that the focus for a church 'is to stand by and assist in the searches for meaning so that Christian symbolism may find a place in their everyday cultural systems'(Ziebertz, 2000).

All of these views reinforce the importance of the school both teaching its students about prayer and silence/stillness, and giving students regular opportunities to practise them.

### **A Balance**

A respect for tradition does not mean an uncritical acceptance. As John Sullivan argues, 'both fidelity and resistance are essential ingredients in any healthy communication of religious tradition in a religious setting' (Sullivan, 2001 p. 16). He calls for a three-way balance between adapting to the needs of the students (plasticity), attending with discipline to the demands of the tradition (piety), while rendering the tradition problematical in order to make an intellectually serious engagement with it (polemic). Such an approach will avoid assuming too much about where students are in their states of consciousness. It will maintain a balance between critical openness and a respect for the wisdom to be found in the tradition, and a willingness to use whatever pedagogical method or tools offered to teachers by the information environment. One example of this is the linking of the stories in popular movies to the 'open narrative' of Christianity advocated by Graeme Barry and Dennis Harvey (Barry & Harvey, 2001). Another example is the work of Graeme Rossiter on the implications for religious education of the impact of film television and advertising on young people (Rossiter, 2001 p. 27-8).

In all this I think it is vital for religious education teachers, schools and parents to have a realistic view of what the school in general, and religious education classes in particular should be reasonably expected to achieve. Here an observation from a wise old man of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps relevant:

'how unequipped are young people, say up to thirty at the earliest, for any final negative decision as to religion. I mean definite, institutional religion; and therefore how heavy is the responsibility of parents and seniors if they provoke, if they give ready occasion to the young to any indiscriminate revolt against such definite institutional religion. Such seniors may have the deepest experience of what such definite, institutional religion means in and for *their own* lives, but they ought simultaneously to make clear to themselves that this, their own formed conviction, has been a an affair of time, and that they must not presuppose it as extant in the young by command or even by careful teaching. This of course in no wise means that children and young people should not be taught *some* religion, should not be wisely trained in *some* religious (institutional religious) convictions and habits. It only means that at every step you should remain conscious of the inevitable, the right of difference between these young things and yourself – and that we will have gained a great point if they leave your hands with only a little definite religion, but with a sense that there may well be more in it than they can, so far, see for themselves' (Hugel, 1950 p. 51-2).

['the right of difference' – how postmodern is that?]

## Conclusion

So how can religious education in schools best serve young people, their parents and the Church in these confused and confusing times? What is called for is neither a smug presumption that what we are already doing is sufficient nor a frenetic and fruitless attempt to turn the clock back to an earlier golden time. Nor yet is it a loss of nerve or will and a resignation that all that can be done is to ride out the postmodern storm. Rather what is needed is a discerning selection of the elements of our tradition (whatever that may be) to select those which are likely to speak best to the young in their situation.

These elements will include the three 'tools' focussed on in this article; story, heroes, and silence. They will also include others such as improved access to scripture, moving worship, and experiences of community and service. Such knowledge and experiences can provide the basis of a sustaining spirituality for this time or any time. The resources of religious tradition, informed by modern knowledge and open to intelligent critique, still offer young people access to a wisdom that may help them find meaning and identity, and perhaps, in some mysterious way, even find God.

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