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## VALUES AND IDENTITY IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION: A RESPONSE TO RABBI MICHAEL A. PALEY

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In his exploration of the values and identity in Jewish education, Rabbi Michael Paley addresses five themes: demography, meaning, learning, assimilation, and curricular integration. This paper uses the same themes to frame some reflections on Catholic education in the United States.

### DEMOGRAPHY

In response to the question, "Who are the Jews?" Rabbi Paley describes the transformation of a "poverty-stricken, oppressed European Jewry into a secure, assimilated, highly American middle-class community." Following the trajectory, he then wonders if Jews will "...become just another contributor to the American melting pot." Rabbi Paley contrasts the orientation of the 200,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews who have maintained a unique identity with that of the majority who have assimilated into American life. It must be noted that the ultra-Orthodox represent a very small percentage—3.4%—of the Jewish population in the United States that numbers 5,880,000 (United States Census Bureau, 1995, p. 70).

A response to the question, "Who are the Catholics?" would, on the one hand, yield a similar response. The U.S. Catholic story is one of transformation of poverty-stricken European immigrants into the American middle class. On the other hand, the Catholic and Jewish experience is quite different. First, while Catholics suffered discrimination in this country, they never experienced the virulence of anti-Semitism that is alive in many quarters even today. Second, while Catholics shared a common religious heritage, their ethnic identities were distinct; they came from very different parts of

Europe and did not share a common language or customs. Third, since the beginning of the 19th century, the Catholic population has been much larger than the Jewish. This year, the Roman Catholic population in the United States numbers 61,207,914, or 23% of the total U.S. population (*Official Catholic Directory*, 1997). The Jewish population represents just over 2% of the total.

These differences in scope are reflected in denominational education efforts. In the 1993-1994 academic year, 655 schools serving 183,851 students identified themselves as Jewish; whereas 8,351 U.S. schools serving 2,516,028 students identified themselves as Catholic (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). In the 1996-1997 academic year, 447 institutions of higher education—241 colleges and universities and 206 seminaries—identified themselves as Catholic (*Official Catholic Directory*, 1997). The National Catholic Educational Association reported the existence of 8,231 Catholic schools—1,226 secondary, 102 middle and 6,903 elementary (Milks, 1997).

Rabbi Paley reminds his readers of the centrality of public education in the lives of American Jews. While there is a significant tradition of denominational schooling for American Catholics, most of them have also been educated in public schools. Schaub and Baker (1994) estimated a Catholic school-age population of 11,754,167 in 1991. Of this population, 18% were enrolled in Catholic schools, 33% in parish-based religious education programs, and the remainder in neither. Catholics should heed Rabbi Paley's concern about the dilution of religious character among young people. Even with the huge and costly effort to maintain 8,678 educational institutions in the United States, the Church must redouble efforts to pass on to Catholic children in all schools a distinctive way of life.

## MEANING

Rabbi Paley poses the question, "Is Judaism truly relevant in the everyday lives of most American Jews?" He implies that the Jewish community neglected schools in favor of social service agencies at home and abroad. He sees a "carefully crafted, dedicated, comprehensive religious education system, much as the Catholics" as a means of restoring continuity to the Jewish community. In light of statistics offered above and in the face of a highly secularized society, I respectfully point out that Catholic educational institutions are not a panacea to religious indifference. The Catholic community also is searching for meaning in its schools, in its social service agencies, domestic and foreign, and in its out-of-school religious education efforts. The attempt to define meaning is especially acute in hospitals and universities, where battles about mission, administrative control, fiscal ownership, and academic freedom are being fought in the popular press.

Unlike the Jewish community, the Catholic Church is highly centralized through a clearly defined hierarchy with an explicit code of canon law and a definition of the tenets of faith in the form of a universal catechism; much emphasis is put upon the “unum.” This does not mean that questions of meaning are settled, however. Numerous opinion polls have demonstrated the distance between the official tenets of Catholicism and the way it is lived among the majority of Americans, what in common parlance is referred to as “cafeteria Catholicism.” Most often used by conservative Catholics as a term of derision for those who question Church authorities on matters of sexual morality (e.g., artificial contraception, any genital activity outside of marriage), doctrinal adherence (transubstantiation, Marian doctrines, eschatological dogma), or personal piety (strict adherence to liturgical norms, return to rituals that were more common before the Vatican Council), the term should also apply to those who undercut the teachings of the Church on social issues (opposition to the death penalty, anti-racist activity, advocacy for recent immigrants, a preferential love for the poor). In the intellectual climate of post-modernism, where overarching heuristic frameworks are often deconstructed and individual subjectivity is prized, it is no surprise that the Catholic population does not espouse one clearly defined Catholic meaning. Moreover, affluence and assimilation lead to a belief in self-sufficiency. Morris (1997), in a recently published history of the Catholic Church in the United States, observes:

The traditional Catholic code book of behavior was perfect for peasants fighting their way out of the bogs, and it worked well enough for second-generation immigrants on the first rungs of middle-class respectability. But except for the newest waves of Hispanic immigrants, American Catholics have long since made it in America. As much as any other religious body, they are middle-class, suburban, educated, affluent. They exercise control over their lives in ways their grandparents never did. (p. 431)

Despite efforts to enhance the sense of “unum” within the Church, the contemporary position of Catholics in the United States fosters an ethos of “pluribus.”

While the postmodern age mitigates against unequivocal meaning-making, the balancing of “unum” and “pluribus” has a long history in the Church. “Roman” is a term that designates the largest of several Catholic churches; the rich diversity among churches of the East, uniate and orthodox, cannot be overlooked. Moreover, within the Roman rite there has always been a wide variety of spiritualities, traditionally concretized in religious communities of women and men: the monastic tradition of Benedict and Scholastica with its emphasis on community, stability, contemplation, and reverence for the written and spoken word; the mendicant tradition of the Dominicans, with its stress on the preached word and the beauty of speculative philosophy; the

simplicity of Francis and Clare, with their love of poverty, sense of wonder at the beauty of creation, and legacy of humble service; the tradition of contemplation in action of Ignatius Loyola, with its emphasis on seeing God in all things and a grounding in the freedom of God's grace that fosters a radical availability for service to others; the apostolic congregations that date from 17th century onward articulated by Vincent de Paul, Julie Billard, Jean Baptiste de La Salle, Mother McAuley, James Ryken, Don Bosco, Elizabeth Ann Seton, and a host of others with their charism to educate and heal and their insight into the dignity of women and children. With the decline of traditional forms of religious life in the U.S. and Western Europe, charisms of the laity are emerging. These new charisms can make use of the rich legacy described above, but will grow out of the lived experience of the present. New forms of charism will surely emerge.

Despite its centralized polity, the Catholic Church is not a monolith, but a rich mosaic. The greatest problem is not diversity—many meanings instead of one unequivocal meaning—the problem is irrelevance. In a world that prizes above all individual wealth, power, and privilege, religion is too often domesticated, tolerated, or simply ignored.

## LEARNING

Rabbi Paley writes that “intellectuality was traditionally the most highly prized quality in the Jewish community...the student who achieved stature in the Beit Midrash commanded more respect than his more athletic or financially secure counterpart.” While he rightly eschews a genetic explanation for the vitality of Jewish intellectual life, in my outsider's view, he underestimates the importance of this dimension of Jewish education by devoting barely one page to the topic.

Most people would agree that Judaism and intellectual life are highly compatible, a view that Rabbi Paley describes as a stereotype or canard. Conversely, in an oft-quoted article, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis (1955) claimed that Catholicism and intellectual life seemed incompatible, at least in the academic establishment of the United States. However, before one can speak of Catholic learning, it is wise to follow Rabbi Paley's process and examine first the dynamics of assimilation.

## ASSIMILATION

For Catholics in this country, the nature of strong communal ties has changed considerably. At one time, Catholics experienced hurtful exclusion. They were considered, in the words of Archbishop Hughes of New York, “necessarily, morally, intellectually, infallibly, a stupid race” (Tyack, 1974, p. 85). Schools were the fitting response.

Roman Catholics constituted the principal urban minority in the United States. Because of their immigrant status, their alien ethnicity, and their at least equally alien religious affiliation, they became the principal single object of educational reform. It was they above all others who were to be reformed through public schools. (Sanders, 1981, pp. 118-119)

To a large extent, the era of Catholicism's alienation from American culture is ended. In a recently published history of parochial schools, Timothy Walch (1996) explains: "Parents and grandparents saw parish schools as a form of protection and security for their children against a frequently hostile American society. In an increasingly pluralistic, ecumenical world, discrimination against Catholics is a distant memory" (p. 243). The arrival of Catholics into the mainstream is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the community welcomes research findings that demonstrate that Catholic educational institutions measure up to common standards of excellence from pre-kindergarten to graduate school. On the other hand, many are skeptical about the measures of success in a world driven by competition and profitability. Will national tests or *U.S. News & World Report* rankings be the measure of excellence—or will the test of goodness come from within? In regard to Jewish education Rabbi Paley wonders if "...spiritual and intellectual traditions which have been marginalized in all public and even in most private schools [can] provide a foundation for rethinking the curriculum and the administration of the school, based on radically different intellectual presuppositions." Such a foundation is unlikely if Judaism and Catholicism remain in an assimilationist mode.

## CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

Rabbi Paley enumerates ten Jewish values, "radically different presuppositions," that underlie a Mishna approach to contemporary schooling. They are:

1. *Talmud* and *Torah*: School Is a Place for the Business of Learning.
2. Love and Respect for the Rights and Feelings of Others.
3. Don't Separate Yourself From the Community.
4. Keep Far From a Bad Neighbor.
5. Respect and Responsibility for the Environment and Property.
6. If I Am Not for Myself, Who Am I?
7. Consideration and Respectful Behavior Toward Others.
8. Make Yourself a Teacher.
9. Acquire for Yourself a Friend.
10. Give People the Benefit of the Doubt.

In a similar vein, Thomas Groome (1996) has articulated five Catholic values that should underlie educational efforts: a positive anthropology of the

person, the sacramentality of life, a communal emphasis, a commitment to tradition, and an appreciation of rationality and learning. He further refines these themes in his book titled *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (1998). They describe a Catholic philosophy of education rather than a philosophy of Catholic education.

In parallel fashion, I offer for your consideration seven Catholic values:

1. *Lex orandi, lex credendi.*
2. The school is a community of memory.
3. *Et verbum caro factum est.*
4. The best decisions are made on the local level.
5. Everyone is my brother or sister.
6. The Catholic Church is catholic.
7. Always keep in mind the end for which something is created.

Following is a brief explanation of each of these values.

### **1. LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI.**

Beliefs are shaped by the experience of communal prayer; faith is more than intellectual assent to formal propositions. Catholicism, like Judaism, has a rich tradition of ritual. In the realm of faith, the eloquence of words is often surpassed by bread, wine, water, oil, and fire. Catholic schools should immerse students in a living Catholic culture that permeates all aspects of school life. They should experience the prayers that mark the passage of hours, understand the rhythm of the liturgical year from fasts to feasts, and experience in sound, sight, taste, touch, and smell the living tradition which they inherit. Young people come to faith through invitation and attraction, not coercion. Catholic educators have a host of symbols to sustain strong school communities in this post-positivistic age, when the secular world is discovering the importance of culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, and heroes (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

### **2. THE SCHOOL IS A COMMUNITY OF MEMORY.**

Like Judaism, Catholicism honors a tradition that is centuries old. In a world plagued by anomie, students must learn the stories told in a way that is compelling for the present. Catholic schools can learn from colleges that are considering an undergraduate concentration on Catholic studies that focuses not on theology, but on culture: literature, history, music, and art. Likewise, students should be exposed to the rich and complex history of the Church, read developmentally appropriate original sources in theology and philosophy, and learn about the controversies and councils that chronicle a pilgrim church, a community *semper reformanda*. Education involves the telling and retelling of sacred stories.

### **3. *ET VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST.***

At the heart of a Catholic sensibility is the mystery of the incarnation: The word was made flesh. This Christological tenet is the basis of an anthropology of hope. While recognizing the nature of sin and facing honestly the brokenness that is constitutive of the human experience, Catholics see in the incarnation the nearness of God and the possibilities of authentic existence. Christ points the way: One must empty out one's life in order to gain life. In a world filled with cynicism, it is indeed possible to have the courage of one's convictions. Catholicism offers to the young the lives of Mary of Nazareth, Mother of God, and others who through the centuries followed the way of Christ. A panoply of saints demonstrate that holiness is neither abstract nor unattainable, but incarnated in the real world. From the outset, Catholicism has honored heroes; Catholic educators must immerse students in the world of Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, and many others. This is character education at its best.

### **4. THE BEST DECISIONS ARE MADE ON THE LOCAL LEVEL.**

A cornerstone of a Catholic view of society is the principle of subsidiarity: While all structures must be judged according to the common good, especially the good of disadvantaged members of the global human family, the preferable arena of decision-making and action is local. Human dignity is served better by families, neighborhoods, and local communities than by large, impersonal, bureaucratic structures. The Church has reaffirmed this conviction: In concert with solidarity one must oppose all forms of collectivism (*Catechism*, 1994) and larger entities must exercise restraint especially in order to protect the integrity of the family (*Catechism*, 1994). Like many others, Bryk (1996) attributes much of the success of Catholic schools to this sensibility: "Rather than regulating human activity under the homogenizing norms of a central bureaucracy, the role of external governance is to facilitate and stimulate collective local action" (pp. 30-31). Bureaucracy and centralization are alien to a Catholic sensibility.

The principle of subsidiarity can be followed to a fault; it must exist in creative tension with the principle of solidarity. David Hollenbach explains:

The stress on the importance of the local, the small-scale, and the particular must be complemented by a kind of solidarity that is more universal in scope. This wider solidarity is essential if the quest for community is to avoid becoming a source of increased conflict in a world already riven by narrowness of vision. (1996, p. 94)



Elshtain points out that Catholic social thought "...begins from a fundamentally different ontology from that assumed and required by individualism and statist collectivism on the other" (1994, p. 160).

## **5. EVERYONE IS MY BROTHER OR SISTER.**

In his encyclical on the organizing principles of social entities, Pope John Paul II describes the theological underpinning of solidarity:

One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One's neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren. (1988, p. 45)

He then distinguishes solidarity from sentimentality:

This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. (Pope John Paul II, 1988, p. 38)

The ramification of this commitment to the common good is that "...those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church" (*Catechism*, 1994, p. 588). In both personal and communal commitments, Catholics must

...be convinced of the seriousness of the present moment and of each one's individual responsibility, and to implement—by the way [we] live as individuals and as families, by the use of [our] resources, by [our] civic activity, by contributing to economic and political decisions and by personal commitment to national and international undertakings—the measures inspired by solidarity and love of preference for the poor. (Pope John Paul II, 1988, p. 58)

Solidarity calls us out of narrowness of vision and short-term thinking. For example, in regard to refugees and immigrants "...solidarity helps to reverse the tendency to see the world solely from one's own point of view" (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 1992, p. 10).

## 6. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS CATHOLIC.

The Vatican has articulated a conviction about race based on the dignity of every human being and manifesting itself in respect for differences, fraternity, and solidarity (Pontifical Commission for Peace and Justice, 1988). The Church eschews a model of assimilation to European cultural patterns and has adopted a philosophy of cultural pluralism. Solidarity and communion do not demand uniformity, but a positive appreciation of the complementary diversity of peoples. Catholic institutions must enhance a “well-understood pluralism” that can resolve “the problem of closed racism” (Pontifical Commission for Peace and Justice, 1988, p. 45).

In their pastoral letter on African-Americans, the bishops of the United States proclaimed that racism is a fundamental sin, a primary pathology in human society, “a radical evil dividing the human family and denying the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation in our own minds and hearts as well as the structure of society” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979, p. 10). The bishops observe:

The minority poor are seen as the dross of post-industrial society—without skills, without motivation, without incentive. They are expendable. Many times the new face of racism is the computer print-out, the graph of profits and losses, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Today’s racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public commitment and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion. It is Christ’s face that is the composite of all persons, but in a most significant way of today’s poor, today’s marginal people, today’s minorities.... As economic pressures tighten, those people who are often Black, Hispanic, Native American and Asian—and always poor—slip further into the unending cycle of poverty, deprivation, ignorance, disease, and crime. Racial identity is for them an iron curtain barring the way to a decent life and livelihood. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979, p. 13)

In 1983 the bishops wrote another letter on racism, this time focused on Latinos. In *The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment* they made an argument from history to demand that Catholics take positive steps to enhance the welfare of this rapidly growing ethnic minority:

Historically, the Church in the United States has been an “immigrant Church” whose outstanding record of care for countless European immigrants remains unmatched. Today that same tradition must inspire in the Church’s approach to recent Hispanic immigrants a similar authority, compassion, and decisiveness. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983, p. 4)

## **7. ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND THE END FOR WHICH SOMETHING IS CREATED.**

The Catholic tradition is teleological: Human structures are means to an end, used only insofar as they serve their original purpose. As a result, they are always probationary and stand in need of constant revision. Institutional stability, predictability, and longevity need to give way to the values of experimentation, risk, and change. In an Ignatian worldview, for example, all things must be judged according to the criteria for which they were created: the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Insofar as these created things foster the end for which they were created, they are to be embraced. Otherwise, they are to be modified or abandoned. Through lived example, students should be invited to this spirit of keen discernment and courageous freedom.

### **CONCLUSION**

In his conclusion, Rabbi Paley presents a challenge to the American Jewish community: "to do research that helps sustain and expand Jewish education." Likewise, the Catholic community should further enhance substantial research initiatives already underway, especially by inviting those outside of the U.S. Catholic school establishment, non-Catholics, and those from other countries to join in the endeavor. In contrast to the Jewish community, the task before the Catholic community is not to grow a new system of schools. Rather, it is to refound many schools on the basis of the unique spiritual and intellectual traditions of the Church.

In my estimation, those traditions are threatened most especially by movements that commodify education. Gerald Grace (1996, p. 70) explains:

Catholic schools in many societies are working in social, political, and ideological conditions which challenge fundamentally their distinctive educational mission and their historical educational commitments. In these present contexts, the Catholic conception of education as primarily moral and spiritual, concerned with principled behavior and focused upon community and public good outcomes, faces a major challenge from New Right conceptions of education which are aggressively market oriented and individualistic in approach.

As Catholics and Jews in the U.S. enjoy a position of mainstream privilege, they must safeguard a collective memory of rift from roots and family, the high hopes of immigrants, and the experience of oppression. That recollection can become the linchpin of what Robert Bellah and his colleagues call a "community of memory...a group of people who are different yet interdependent, who are bound together by mutual responsibilities arising out of a common history constituted by their past" (1985, p. 246). If they uncritical-

ly assume the philosophical underpinnings of free-market individualism, they may become "lifestyle enclaves," where "history and hope are forgotten and community means only a gathering of the similar" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 154).

In his book *Foundations of Social Theory*, James Coleman, a great advocate of Catholic schools, wrote that "social capital is one of those forms of capital which depreciates over time. Like human capital and physical capital, social capital depreciates if it is not renewed" (1990, p. 321). In the face of upward mobility and assimilation, social capital in Catholic schools needs to be renewed. It will be sadly ironic if the schools lose their communal ethos in imitation of non-Catholic institutions that have lost a shared religious purpose and now serve a select upper-middle-class clientele; institutions in which immigrants, poor people, and minorities feel like strangers. For the Catholic community, uncritical involvement in market-based reform initiatives may have a mortal consequence: We may save our schools but lose our soul.

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