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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: NECESSARY FOR PERFECTION

Daniel Skinner

“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹

I. Introduction

The aim of education should not be utilitarian, merely the creation of skilful functionaries sufficiently trained to serve in specialised roles in the workplace.² Rather, the aim of education should be the cultivation of virtuous persons who know how to be perfect, who know how to “attain their proper end.”³ Religious education, conceived of (in this paper) as theological education, is an essential element in this journey to self-perfection, for God is man’s proper end. Thus, it is not only necessary to *know* about Him, but to worship and love Him, and such is the end of religious education. In this paper, after outlining the nature of religious knowledge, I argue, from an anthropological and Christological perspective, that religious education ought to be a part of every person’s education. I also consider and dispute the secular/pluralist position, which tends toward an impersonal, scientific, and relativistic conception of religious knowledge and education.

II. Anthropology and Religious Knowledge

Before we argue about what *ought* to be taught, we must first understand *who* is being taught. Man is a rational animal, made by and for God, in His image and likeness. Hence, man *qua* animal is reproductive, digestive, moving, and sensing; man *qua* human person has an intellect by which he can understand what is true, and a will by which he can pursue the good; and man *qua imago Dei* means his vocation is to live a life of charity, a holy life in loving communion

¹ Matthew 5:48. All Scripture passages will be taken from the *RSV* unless otherwise stated.

² In this paper, education does not only signify formal/institutional education (e.g., primary, secondary and tertiary), but also includes non-formal education. Thus, my argument is that at some point in one’s life, one ought to be religiously educated.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), II-II, 184, 1. Aquinas on perfection: “[a] thing is said to be perfect in so far as it attains its proper end, which is the ultimate perfection thereof. Now it is charity that unites us to God, Who is the last end of the human mind, since “he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity.” Importantly, in this life we can only attain earthly perfection (a state corrupted by venial sin), rather than heavenly perfection, the state of those in Heaven.

with his neighbours and with God. The perfection of man requires the ordering of all these aforementioned aspects to his proper end, and such perfection is available only to those who know and love God, which is greatly aided by the attainment of religious knowledge.⁴

Religious knowledge is a justified true belief about God or the transcendent.⁵ For an atheist or logical positivist who denies transcendent reality, such metaphysical knowledge cannot exist – no religious belief can be justifiable or true. The only knowledge one can attain, in this view, is scientific knowledge attained via inductive judgement and sense observation: that which pertains to the causes and effects of physical objects.⁶ Furthermore, atheists cannot logically strive toward perfection, since, in their view, there is no fixed and transcendent measure or standard of perfection. You cannot “become better” without a conception of “best” and “worst.” Alternatively, as Josef Pieper writes, since man has an intellect which abstracts universals from particulars, he is not bound by environment, by mere physical relations.⁷ Rather, man *qua* spiritual being, is, as Aquinas writes, “capable of grasping the whole of being;”⁸ he has the potency to comprehend the *world*: the unified totality of reality; including aspects of God, Who is man’s measure of perfection.⁹ Therefore, insofar as man can understand aspects of God, man can attain religious knowledge.¹⁰

But what is the nature of religious knowledge? There seems to be two opposing conceptions: the pluralist/secular position, and the Christian/Catholic position. The pluralist position conceives religious knowledge as *episteme* (scientific knowledge), the education of which is a form of social science, studying the reasons why different religions hold certain beliefs and practice different customs.¹¹ In this view, religious knowledge is also considered as *techne* (practical knowledge), the study of how to co-exist with those of other religions.¹² From

⁴ As Aquinas argues, God is the Principal Cause – the First Cause – of learning. The teacher is the instrumental, secondary cause.

⁵ In this paper, I assume the traditional definition of knowledge: “justified true belief.” I also assume an epistemological realism, since, as Chesterton remarked, epistemological realists can “throw out a bridge across the abyss of the first doubt and found reality beyond and (begin) to build on it” ((G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2011) 149). If we begin our inquiry doubting our ability to inquire, our work is over before it begins.

⁶ Jane Rupert, *John Henry Newman on the Nature of the Mind: Reason in Religion, Science, and the Humanities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 36.

⁷ Josef Pieper, *The Philosophical Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 98.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57), 3, 112.

⁹ Pieper, *The Philosophical Act*, 101.

¹⁰ Religious knowledge, in this paper, pertains to that which can be known about God; the education about which involves the transmission of that which can be known by natural reason (e.g., that God exists), and the transmission of divine truth revealed in Scripture (e.g., that God is triune).

¹¹ These different kinds of knowledge are distinguished by Aristotle in his books on logic and in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹² Such is the aim of the NSW subject “Studies of Religion.”

a pluralist perspective, religious knowledge is impersonal, and the transcendent is sceptically considered from a distance. In such a classroom, one can arrive at a position about a religion “without any ... change of heart.”¹³

The Catholic view, however, is far more compelling: religious education is primarily considered a passing on of *nous* (metaphysical knowledge), the understanding of the Word (*logos*) of God (*Theo*), of Revelation in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Moreover, as Patrick Giddy notes, “theology presupposes faith.”¹⁴ Theology as “faith seeking understanding” differs to science (doubt seeking proof) in three key ways, as outlined by John Henry Newman.¹⁵ The first is the “magisterial role” of the imagination in religious thinking: the “primary locus of divine illumination ... where impressions and images engage heart and mind in such a way that feeling is integral to thought”¹⁶ Secondly, the pattern of reasoning characteristic of theology is “cumulative (and) convergent;”¹⁷ that is, we are persuaded of theological truths “by the strength, variety, or multiplicity of premisses, which are only probable [and not scientifically provable] ... by difficulties gradually clearing up” all of which are presented through the use of rhetoric.¹⁸ Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, theological reasoning requires the “illative sense” – “the exercise of personal judgement.”¹⁹ Following from this, and inspired by Bernard Lonergan, Giddy writes, “the foundation of theology is conversion, religious, moral, and intellectual;”²⁰ theology uniquely calls for a personal response – love.²¹ The attainment of religious knowledge, therefore, in Newman’s and Lonergan’s view can, and should be, life-changing and love-generating. Therefore, if educators want to help their pupils attain perfection, it is the Catholic conception of religious (theological) knowledge and education that should prevail, for in so doing, the personal remains in the classroom, and God is rightly considered as man’s proper end.

¹³ Patrick Giddy, “Why Theology Can and Should be Taught at Secular Universities: Lonergan on Intellectual Conversion,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45, no. 3 (2011), 528.

¹⁴ Giddy, “Why Theology Can and Should be Taught,” 527.

¹⁵ This is explicated by Jane Rupert in *John Henry Newman on the Nature of the Mind: Reason in Religion, Science, and the Humanities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).

¹⁶ Rupert, *John Henry Newman*, 35.

¹⁷ Rupert, *John Henry Newman*, 38.

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 254, in Rupert, 38. It is important to note that rhetoric for the ancients and medievals was the “queen of the language disciplines,” the art of practical reasoning, dissimilar to the contemporary pejorative conception of rhetoric: “language used to persuade, often through deception or insincerity.”

¹⁹ Rupert, *John Henry Newman*, 40.

²⁰ Giddy, “Why Theology Can and Should be Taught,” 537.

²¹ For example, Christ says, “[i]f any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-5). Such is the personally demanding nature of theology.

III. Arguments for the Necessity of Catholic Religious Education

Now that we have outlined and advocated for the Catholic conception of religious education, let us now consider whether it ought to be a part of every education. The first argument for the affirmative centres on anthropology, on what man *can* and *should* know:

P1. Education should aim to perfect pupils.

P2. As Aquinas writes, “something is perfect insofar as it attains its proper end.”

P3. God is man’s proper end.

P4. Theology transmits knowledge of God.

P5/C1. Theology transmits knowledge that is necessary to attain perfection.

C. Theology should be a part of every education.

In this view, a theology-deprived education denies pupils the knowledge of who they are – man as *imago Dei* – leaving pupils restless, since “our hearts will be restless until they rest in Thee [God].”²² Moreover, an education which is deprived of theology, is one which denies pupils the capacity to understand the highest things – God and his Revelation. In regard to theology, Newman notes that the more universal is the subject of study, the higher and more “foremost ... important and large” is the discipline.²³ Additionally, as Jacques Maritain argues, education ought to help pupils attain freedom, and if freedom is conceived as the ability to pursue the good, then religious education is necessary in order to learn about the highest Good that ought to be pursued.²⁴ Moreover, since man cannot understand all aspects of God, for “some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason,”²⁵ a sense of mystery is retained, helping pupils remain humble before the grand unknown: to know *who they are* in relation to God – finite before the Infinite.²⁶ With a sense of mystery also comes a sense of awe: a reverential mix of fear and wonder, which helps one overcome the stifling and depressing selfishness characteristic of the *ego-drama* in opposition to the *Theo-drama*.²⁷

²² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3. Pupils who lack theological education will also inevitably substitute God with either pleasure, power, wealth, or honour, all of which are created goods.

²³ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 36.

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943) 10-12.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 3.

²⁶ Pieper, *The Philosophical Act*, 116.

²⁷ A concept of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Hans U. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 1-5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

Lastly, if Christ is perfectly God, and perfectly man, then it is He Whom we should imitate if we want to be perfect. Theology (Christ's Word) helps us encounter and imitate Him. By doing so, we learn, among countless other things, that suffering is an inevitable aspect of human experience that will only fully cease in Heaven; that suffering can be offered up to God and be grace-filled and redemptory;²⁸ that we are never alone in our suffering, since God assumed all aspects of the human condition (except sin); that death has been defeated;²⁹ and that love is sacrificial: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."³⁰ If only acknowledged impersonally from a distance, Christ cannot grant the gifts He offers. One can only integrate the redemptive power of suffering by personally encountering Christ, by aligning oneself with Him and taking up one's cross. Theology best aids one in this pursuit.

IV. An Argument Against the Necessity of Catholic Religious Education

Contrary to the Catholic position hitherto stated, Robert Jackson, a prominent scholar of education and advocate of pluralism and inclusive study of religions, proposes that the ideal model of religious education is, it seems, utilitarian: one that fosters an appreciation of each religion, valuing them equally, so that we, in our multicultural, pluralised, and globalised world, can live in greater harmony and understanding.³¹ He conflates religious education with citizenship and intercultural education.³² Though I agree with his desire for harmony, since, as Augustine writes, peace is man's ultimate goal, and with the motive to teach about all religions (for this subject certainly has its place)³³ I ardently oppose the notion that we must teach religions indifferently, for the following two reasons.³⁴

²⁸ "...[i]ndeed we share in his [Christ's] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:17).

²⁹ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

³⁰ John 15:13.

³¹ Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (London: Routledge, 2013), 20. Notice his conception of religious education as *techne* (practical knowledge).

³² Jackson, "Rethinking Religious Education," 22.

³³ I.e., studies of religion, and the history of religions. See Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 119-145, for a brilliant outline of why every education in the West must include the study of Western culture. In short, he argues that an education deprived of the knowledge of Christianity, will deny pupils the understanding of the past, the foundations of the West: that which is historically the subject of most of literature and art (i.e., Christianity), that which is the grounds of our dominant Judaeo/Christian ethical framework (e.g., the Golden Rule), and thus the grounds of great Western institutions (e.g., hospitals, universities, our legal system, etc.).

³⁴ Saint Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin UK, 2003, XIX) 11: "peace ... is the final fulfilment of all our earthly goods." However, Augustine makes the distinction between the inferior goal of earthly peace "based on things belonging to this temporal life," with the goal of heavenly peace, which is the goal of eternal life.

Firstly, as mentioned, the fruits of religion lie in the adoption of the religion. By remaining neutral and avoiding content that may demand a personal response and shift in worldview (conversion), merely teaching *about* religion remains only an impersonal passing on of information which is antithetical to religious demands and personal needs. For it must be remembered: teachers are not filling computers with information ... but sharing knowledge with *persons*. Moreover, this pluralist pedagogy encourages chronic agnosticism, scepticism, and relativism, inculcating an indecisiveness that can lead to a value-less life.³⁵ We cannot avoid inculcating fixed values in pupils. Contra to Rousseau, children are not pure and “noble savages” who flourish by following their natural inclinations, as the doctrine of Original Sin explicates. The idea of teaching a fixed ethical framework, grounded in the transcendent and unchanging character of God, is to cultivate virtue in the pupil, virtues that they would not naturally know of or practice without guidance.³⁶

Lastly, and most importantly, Christianity is either true or false. If it is true, then Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and any other religion which claim contrary accounts of God’s nature and His work, are “neither truthful nor profitable.”³⁷ The same goes with denominations or “churches” – Catholicism is either true or false. If it is true, then so is everything the Church has dogmatically pronounced since Pentecost. As an educator, to avoid reasoning in such a way, to be relativistic, to only make descriptive judgements and not discriminate judgements about religion, is cowardice insofar as it is a cowering from the debate. Even though the West has largely become secular, pluralistic and multicultural, the ideal is not to fight indefinitely about religions, but to decide which faith is true, to become a disciple, and then to try and bring everyone into the fullness of the truth, so that those who listen can be perfected.

V. Conclusion

We have thus argued that since religious knowledge is attainable and necessary in order to become perfect, by knowing about and loving our proper end (God – He Who reveals *who* we

³⁵ See Brian Besong, “Teaching the Debate,” *Teaching Philosophy* 39, 4 (Ohio: Dominican University) 2016. Besong concludes: “... teaching the debate will tend to produce student agnosticism, engaging the debate [arguing for a position] can be plausibly expected to avoid that negative consequence.”

³⁶ See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book X.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 10.

are and *how* we ought to live), religious education, conceived as Catholic theological education, ought to be a part of every person's education.

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