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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE 1980's: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

Raymond C. O'Brien

Our hopes often advance the causes in our lives. And if our cause is the fostering of a religious perspective amidst the acquisition of skills and assimilation of knowledge in this world, how are we to determine if the hope that we bring to this cause shall ever be realized? Is it possible to place a religious perspective within education? It must be possible. The hope has lasted too long to be dismissed as unachievable. Among educators cherishing the religious perspective, the hope and, thus, the ideal has manifested itself not only in bricks and mortar, but in sacrifice and in sainthood. The man or woman seeking to instill the possibility of religious education in any institution should be emboldened by the words of a fellow religious idealist educator: "Fiscal exigencies may detain us, demographic trends discourage us, and the uncertain times complicate our plans. They must never becloud our vision of the ideal we pursue. Ultimately, our survival is justifiable only on the quality of that idea."¹

¹ Inaugural Address of Dr. Edmund Daniel Pellegrino, M.D., President, The Catholic University of America (March 30, 1979).

If the educator who fosters this religious perspective can indeed hope that the ideal is realizable, then it is his or her task each day to work towards that ideal. Nothing more can be expected. No assurance of achieving our goal can be ours. As education is a process, so is the task of integrating a religious perspective. Our progress in this task can only be measured through the efforts that are expended, and even those efforts are subject to changing criteria. Nonetheless, any time a significant event occurs as we work at this task, valuable lessons may be learned by all. Because the accreditation of the O.W. Coburn School of Law by the American Bar Association is such a significant event, any person involved with the issue of religious perspective in education may benefit from an analysis of this particular benchmark.

The facts are important. On All Saints Day, 1980, the inspection team from the American Bar Association left the O. W. Coburn School of Law of Oral Roberts University. Six months later, the ABA Accreditation Committee denied provisional accreditation primarily on the ground that the law school violated Standard 211, which prohibited "religious discrimination." In essence, the Standard 211 violation consisted of the law school's requirements that its faculty and its students sign a Code of Honor Pledge recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and that a student applicant for admission furnish a clergyman's recommendation that includes a rating of Christian commitment. Because of this, the O. W. Coburn School of Law could not receive provisional accreditation, the *sine qua non* of graduates of the law school sitting for state bar examinations. To challenge this denial, the law school filed suit against the ABA.

On July 17, 1981, two months after denial of accreditation, the United States District Court in Chicago, Illinois, entered an order enjoining the American Bar Association from denying provisional accreditation on the basis of Standard 211. The court stayed enforcement of the order until the ABA House of Delegates meeting to be held one month later. The House of Delegates met in August 1981 and voted provisional accreditation to the school and adopted an amendment to Standard 211. The litigation ended. The law school's graduates may now apply to sit for the state bar examinations. For the present, Oral Roberts University's law school accreditation battles seem to have temporarily abated. However, this accreditation has a significant meaning for all schools seeking to impart a religious perspective in education.

The struggle involved in the accreditation of the law school at ORU is just one instance of a larger struggle underway between some religiously oriented schools seeking to recapture their institutions from what has been classified as "secular humanism," and groups such as this particular accreditation agency which seek to foster, often in the name of neutrality, the religion of secular humanism.

It is difficult to make generalizations about or define a creed for something as complex as secular humanism; it is dangerous, in fact, to do so. Nonetheless, perhaps it is possible to define this secular humanistic direction with the aid of an observation made by Hans Kung: "... all the important spheres of human life — learning, economy, politics, law, state, culture, education, medicine, social welfare — have been withdrawn from the influences of the churches, of theology and religion, and placed

under the direct responsibility and control of man, who has himself become 'secular'.² A more radical definition that would place in focus the theological problem of secularism is Peter Berger's definition: "Both social institutions and individual lives are increasingly explained as well as justified in terms devoid of transcendent referents."³

But any definition of the creed of secular humanism cannot capture the spirit. By itself it seems sterile, and it imposes parameters that seem sterile. However, religiously oriented men and women are increasingly aware of the effect of the absence of "transcendent referents." This absence means an absence of mystery; it brings with it a tendency to reduce all matters to problems admitting of simple, once-and-for-all answers: "People are reduced to numbers — numbers which are expected to produce or be considered worthless. The tendency, if we are treated in such a manner long enough, is to accept the inference — again, with disastrous results."⁴ Secular humanism thus affects the quality of the daily interaction of life. Therefore, if a school seeks to base its interaction upon a transcendent premise, it must do so in struggle with humanism.

For some purveyors of religiously oriented education, secular humanism is more than an incidental struggle. These educators face the ultimate challenge: the extinction of religion itself. In 1978, Edward O. Wilson wrote a book in which he suggests

² H. KUNG. ON BEING A CHRISTIAN 26-27 (1976).

³ Berger, *For a World with Windows*, in *AGAINST THE WORLD FOR THE WORLD* 10 (P. Berger and R. Neuhaus eds. 1976).

⁴ E. LARSEN. SPIRITUAL RENEWAL OF THE AMERICAN PARISH 54 (1975).

that religion will eventually be eliminated by science: "... the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly material phenomenon."⁵

Certainly, Oral Roberts University would be among those who seek to challenge this mode of thought. The will to do so is implicit in the university's statement of purpose: "... to assist the student in his quest for knowledge of his relationship to God, man, and the universe."⁶ In its lawsuit against the American Bar Association, Oral Roberts University put this will into practice. Quite frankly, ORU's action raises a question not only for the ABA, but for all those involved with religious symbols and criteria for its students and faculty. How specifically religious can they and others similarly situated become? Because of this question, the accreditation of O. W. Coburn School of Law is a benchmark which all religiously oriented educators must consider.

However, the objective analysis of this question presents an inherent danger. The danger lies in our human propensity to sanctify symbols so that even they become problems manipulated in a world devoid of transcendent referents. Authentic symbols of religion effectuate interaction between the transcendent and the world. Unfortunately, we have a human tendency to become so attached to our symbols that we lose all perspective on the spiritual principles that the symbols represent. It does us no good to fight a battle for the right to manipulate

⁵ E. WILSON. ON HUMAN NATURE 92 (1978).

⁶ Oral Roberts University, O. W. Coburn School of Law Bulletin 7 (1982-83).

a religious symbol, if we lose the war of religious education in the process. There is a warning, voiced by a man who was prolific in his interaction, Thomas Merton: "The world itself is no problem, but we are a problem to ourselves because we are alienated from ourselves, and this alienation is due precisely to an inveterate habit of division by which we break reality into pieces and then wonder why, after we have manipulated the pieces until they fall apart, we find ourselves out of touch with life, with reality, with the world and most of all with ourselves."⁷

With all respect to many noted scholars and theologians, it is the question of how educators may promote effective interaction that frustrates our mission and leads to the default of our goals. We ask, with commentators on education like John Holt: "How are we to put back in our world a sense of stability and human and humane purpose?"⁸ The question of practical means causes administrators to pause before such statements as: "The church exists always and only for the sake of the kingdom of God, i.e., the redemptive and liberating presence of God in the world, bringing all things into one, a unity of peace and justice, of love and reconciliation."⁹ While such statements are essential to the definition of the general role of the church, they do little to identify specific methods or means by which the educator can properly integrate religion and education. Any efforts at identifying such means,

⁷ T. MERTON, *CONTEMPLATION IN A WORLD OF ACTION* 171 (1965).

⁸ J. HOLT *ESCAPE FROM CHILDHOOD* 44 (1974).

⁹ Address of Rev. Richard McBrien to the Association of Catholic Colleges, in Washington, D. C. (Feb. 3, 1981), *reprinted in* National Catholic Reporter, March 27, 1981, at 9.

no matter from which quarter, lighten the task of the administrator seeking to educate by example rather than by clairvoyance.

Oral Roberts University's law school does offer some identification of method. It posits a goal of reception of baptism in the Holy Spirit and promises a student that he will be asked, "... at specific intervals to evaluate honestly his own spiritual interest and growth in terms of his ability to face his problems effectively and effectively relate his Christian witness to his environment."¹⁰ Even more specifically, the school incorporates into its religious perspective positive norms such as Bible study, neatness of dress, good manners, and respect between the sexes. On the prohibitive side, students must avoid sexual immorality, cheating, lying, stealing, gambling, profanity, vandalism, use of alcohol, and other negative forces. Any religiously oriented educator must recognize the value of these specific witness elements to the community ORU seeks to affect, whether or not these elements are accepted as part of his own religious beliefs.

The imperative facing religious educators is now better focused. No matter how one may view the particular accreditation of this school of law, all are asked: Is there now a viable opportunity for incorporating a religious perspective and maintaining accreditation standards, and, if so, what is the possibility of incorporating my own religious perspective into my institutional enterprise? Each school must now think through its own perspective and identify those elements it seeks to foster. Although

¹⁰ Oral Roberts University, O. W. Coburn School of Law Bulletin 13 (1982-83).

there are many elements which are part of a complete analysis, three of the most prominent are tradition, worship, and social concern.

Surely many schools, in an effort to regain a religious perspective, shall seek to recapture traditions. Because they refuse to be curators in a museum, many will conclude that the perspective is not to be found solely in a pure historical treatment. "Historical gratitude, as it were, is not a motive for faith."¹¹ Nonetheless, dress and deportment can be constitutive traditional elements in any religious perspective. If we consider the Roman Catholic traditional garbs of only a few years ago, the image is clearly synonymous with plaid skirts, blue ties, and processions, two-by-two, up Main Street each May. Those who would decry the use of these symbols of identity would do so because they do not understand the community importance that was attributed to them, or because they no longer believe the community regards them as important at all. Their argument would run that the community simply does not care about such traditions and what is more significant, that such traditions no longer capture the essence of the faith with which they are identified. Being irrelevant in a society educated in secularity, they no longer mean anything at all. The sociologist, William McSweeney, confronts the traditionalists by asking if their symbols mean anything of the faith that spawned them, or are they important because of force of habits, "... like the lapsed Jews who are still inhibited from

¹¹ P. BERGER, *THE HERETICAL IMPERATIVE* 119 (1979).

eating certain foods.”¹² Any religious perspective must inquire into the relevance of tradition. In a society increasingly mobile, tradition could simply fail to capture the essence of the belief from which it came.

The worship experience is another element of religious perspective that many see as essential. Some see it as the only essential element: “For Christians who believe that it is possible to relate oneself by knowledge and love to the transcendent God, worship is of vital importance for fostering this personal relationship.”¹³ But as with tradition, the problems confronting us in the experience of worship are diverse. In the Roman Catholic worship tradition, there has been a vast transformation from the days of the Elizabethan priest, who, when sentenced to death for celebrating Mass, stood and sang in the courtroom a “Te Deum,” the traditional hymn for celebrating victories. Today, priests link hands and recite the Our Father as they are convicted of civil disobedience growing out of the issues of taxes, nuclear energy, emergency housing, and women’s liberation.¹⁴ Worship, at least as a distinctive element, is heir to the pluralism of the times and thus suffers a unique identity crisis. There is a new call, however, heard from persons like the Jesuit Avery Dulles, one of the drafters of the “Hartford Appeal” and the author of many other books, often echoed by persons asserting the unique importance

¹² W. MCSWEENEY, *ROMAN CATHOLICISM: THE SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE* 239 (1980).

¹³ A. DULLES, *THE RESILIENT CHURCH* 81 (1977).

¹⁴ Many comments regarding liturgical form may be found in G. WILLS, *BARE RUINED CHOIRS: DOUBT, PROPHECY, AND RADICAL RELIGION* (1971).

of worship: "The task of believers in the secular world is strongly emphasized to the neglect, perhaps, of grace, of worship, and of hope for eternal union with God."¹⁵ This is certainly the call for the inclusion of a transcendent worship element in the educational enterprise.

But perhaps the most vocal group is the one that calls for social consciousness and espouses the total servant model of service to the community. The servant role, they would argue, is the true believer's unique call, his or her only source of perspective. This cause is taken up through the renunciation of wealth and power as ultimate values and by finding happiness in the love of God and of one's fellow human beings.¹⁶ Such responsibility was ratified by the Second Vatican Council: "... man is defined before all else by his responsibility to his brothers and at the court of history."¹⁷ Surely there is no need to recite examples calling for total religious commitment to social justice as an essential element of religious perspective. We are daily bombarded from all forms of media with social needs of gigantic proportions present in all parts of the globe. Moreover, some issues of social consciousness simply cannot be ignored by Christians. Among these are the issues of nuclear war, employment, and the family. Betty Friedan, a feminist source, touts the family as a prime issue of the

¹⁵ A. DULLES, *THE RESILIENT CHURCH* 60 (1977).

¹⁶ Walsh and Langen, *Patristic Social Consciousness — The Church and the Poor*, in *THE FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE* 146 (J. Haughey ed. 1977).

¹⁷ Flannery, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, in *VATICAN COUNCIL II* 960 (1975).

present women's movement: "The answer is to reorganize, strengthen or create new family forms that can sustain us now — and will change, as our needs change, over time."¹⁸ The family will be a social issue of dramatic proportions in the future.

It is because of its unique role in the religious education battle that the O. W. Coburn School of Law can now offer an example of an approach to tradition, worship, and social consciousness, and perhaps even a hint of the future. Through distinctive dress and manners, there is a recognition of tradition. Worship is demanded and its effect scrutinized. Social concern is witnessed through "civic clubs; churches, missions, hospitals, jails, retirement homes, and on radio and television." The impact of accreditation of the school will be to recognize these factors as essential to the religious perspective in education and to allow the education community to examine the subsequent effect upon the profession. What will be the effect upon that secular society which the supporters of the Oral Roberts Ministries seek to challenge? And what, moreover, will be the impact upon the beliefs and practices of those of us responsible for developing a religious perspective in education?

The answer lies not in the success of any religion's prescriptions regarding dress codes, worship, or social action. Most of us, much as Dr. Wilson anticipates, have passed beyond these individual criteria of orthodoxy; we now seek the belief they represent. For those of us who have not passed beyond these criteria, the taunt of Kenneth Rexroth will become all too hypocritically true: "Religion is

¹⁸ B. FRIEDAN, *THE SECOND STAGE* 53 (1981).

something that men do, not something they believe.”¹⁹ It is this effort to implant belief into the hearts and minds of the students and assorted faculty that the accreditation team failed to inspect. The team reported that they found little effort to integrate Christianity into the curriculum. They found that teaching materials were not altered. Nonetheless, and this must be the test of the educators at Oral Roberts University, the team did remark that they found an undeniably different spirit at the law school. It is this spirit that must be watched by those seeking to understand the possibility of a religious perspective in education.

Most assuredly, if the impact of the accreditation of the O. W. Coburn School of Law is to be understood in terms of the methods or symbols of religious identity, then those examining those methods and their impact would do well to seek to understand the spirit they engender. This is the criteria of evangelization:

“Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness . . . a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is

¹⁹ 8 M. MARTY AND D. PEERMAN, *NEW THEOLOGY* 76 (1971).

not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. . . Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one."²⁰

Thus, the future of this particular religious enterprise, as well as the importance of its accreditation for advancing a religious perspective in education, shall be measured by the community it transmits. This is now the fearsome responsibility of the O. W. Coburn School of Law and a standard for all others hoping to foster such goals. The true impact of this accreditation rests upon the manner in which we foster this community, and there is no simple answer to what methods or symbols should be employed in achieving the result.

The challenge, then, is not simply to battle our way out of some particular quagmire, self-induced or caused by others. Rather, and this answers the question of why we hope for a religious perspective:

“We must attend to the fact that moral and religious life is not just a matter of specific decisions about dilemmas or specific sacred acts of devotion; but that both realms involve highly integrated sensitivities, responsibilities, attitudes — matters of character, will, thought, and affection — that run through all of life. Hence, the style of education, the qualities of relationships it fosters, and the total life involvement with persons

²⁰ Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelic Nunciandi* 17 (Dec. 18, 1975) (printed by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D. C., 1976).

may be just as important as the content
'taught'."²¹

²¹ W. Rogers, *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Moral and Religious Development: A Critical Overview*, in TOWARD MORAL AND RELIGIOUS MATURITY 46 (1980).