

MY PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

According to Professor Thomas Groome, Christian education encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that reflect a faith perspective. Its aim is to make a fundamental difference in how people realize their being in relation with God, self, others and the world.¹ The metaphor that best expresses its purpose is the Reign of God.²

Groome believes our teaching should engage all the dimensions and dynamics of human 'being'. He advocates realizing this through 'shared Christian praxis'; wherein people reflect critically on their story, and on their socio-cultural reality, in the context of Christian Story and Vision.³ He defines 'praxis' as purposeful human activity that holds in dialectical unity both theory and practice, critical reflection and historical engagement – all the corporeal, mental and volitional activities by which we intentionally realize ourselves as agent-subjects in place and time.⁴

Shared praxis can be enacted by a focusing activity - some particular historical issue or life-centred theme - and five subsequent pedagogical movements:

- 1- Naming / expressing praxis
- 2- Critical reflection on present action
- 3- Making accessible Christian story and vision
- 4- Dialectical hermeneutic to appropriate Christian story / vision to participants' stories and visions
- 5- Decision / response for lived Christian faith⁵

¹ Thomas H. Groome, Sharing Faith, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991)

² Ibid, 14.

³ Ibid, 135.

⁴ Ibid, 136-137.

⁵ Ibid, 146.

Groome believes good education has a humanizing import in people's lives that informs and forms them in how to think critically, act responsibly and create imaginatively; and that the educator's task is to invite participants to imagine the consequences of their praxis, and envision how an aspect of it can or should be reshaped to promote the well-being of all.⁶

He believes that key principles for bringing people to a decision for lived Christian faith are:

1. maintaining an open environment welcoming the contributions of all,
2. inviting people's own decisions,
3. respecting the readiness of participants for decision-making,
4. imagining procedures to encourage decisions,
5. adapting questioning activities to the level of the participants,
6. facilitating group planning,
7. maintaining a presence of empathetic listening and support, and
8. being willing to invest your 'self' in the activity⁷

In summary, Groome's pedagogical creed may be expressed as follows:

1. Engage participants as agents in relationship rather than as dependents in isolation; in a curriculum free of manipulation, domination and indoctrination, which actively engages their whole being – their physical, mental and volitional capacities, their head, heart and action, their intellect, desire and will, their reason, memory and imagination; and enables them to reclaim their past, embrace their present and take responsibility for their own and others' future.⁸

⁶ Ibid, 205

⁷ Groome, 274

⁸ Ibid, 430

2. Invite people into participation, partnership and interdependence, in a community of inclusiveness and mutuality.⁹
3. Educate people in God consciousness with a sense of awe and reverence at all that is and a sense that their own horizon of life is never closed; encouraging them to cherish themselves and others as being of unqualified dignity and worth, and making their lived response to God's love the central commitment of their lives.¹⁰
4. Teach that God is not an idea but is active among us, politically involved in history on our behalf; that all people have ultimate self-worth and are called to fullness of life, called to be, by God's grace, partners and agents of God's reign in history.¹¹
5. Teach the central Christological affirmations of the Church as defined in the creedal statements and an understanding of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.¹²
6. Educate disciples to take on His mission, commitments and values confident that by God's grace their efforts can have significant historical consequences for their own and others' well-being.¹³
7. Encourage discernment and decision-making to enable people to recognize and respond to the movements of God's spirit in their lives and come to a critical social consciousness whereby they commit themselves to reconciliation and transformation.¹⁴
8. Encourage Christian community among participants to form them as members of the local and universal church.¹⁵

Groome's philosophy accords well with my own, which was shaped by some 25 years of experience in adult education in both business and military situations, and ten years as a student and tutor of practical or

⁹ Ibid, 431.

¹⁰ Ibid, 433.

¹¹ Ibid, 436.

¹² Ibid, 437.

¹³ Ibid, 440.

¹⁴ Ibid, 443.

¹⁵ Ibid, 445

applied philosophy. The basic tenet of adult education, at least in the two areas in which I functioned, is “nobody goes to lunch until they do what was taught”. A premium is placed on the application of the material presented in some practical manner. This perspective has been reinforced by my experience in the School of Practical Philosophy, which translated eastern and western scripture and thought into practical tools to assist with the lived life. The School introduced me to the synergy of the small group as the primary forum in which understanding of abstract concepts is refined and examined in the light of one’s own experience, and translated into purposeful activity. The group is also a support for the maintenance of individual practice on the journey. Without the encouragement of a group of caring peers, and accountability to them for one’s actions, in my experience the myriad pressures and influences of daily life can easily turn resolve into lapsed intention.

Participation in Cursillo introduced me to Michael Pink’s “The Bible Incorporated in Your Life, Job and Business”¹⁶, which presented the Biblical scripture as timeless principles of practical wisdom to achieve personal, professional and business success. Pink has organized the wisdom of the Bible to provide real answers to real life situations – like what to do when you feel burned out on the job, or when there is more to do than time allows – in words of pure scripture, nothing else. The practical application of the Bible, supported by the 4th Day Small Groups that Cursillo fosters, led me to understand how my life experience and my faith could be integrated into a coherent whole. My faith came alive when I incorporated it into all of the activities of my life. That process was facilitated by membership in a small group, the members of which shared the journey with me and helped me to refine my understanding and maintain my spiritual practice through good times and bad.

¹⁶ Michael Q. Pink, “The Bible Incorporated”, (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1988)

I believe that Christian Education is about that experience – the building of a supportive community that helps one to transform faith into action – to walk the talk – and to examine the truth claims of the faith through the lens of one’s personal experience in the context of the present time and place. I believe it is informed by but different from religious education, which is essentially academic study.