

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By Robert Egbert

Prepared for ICCT
Conference 1988

005-88 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By Robert Egbert

Introduction

As of 1924 psychologists identified 5,684 instincts – 83 of them religious. The claim was that religion was innate, unlearned, and biological in origin. In Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War, W. Trotter felt that religion was an expression of the basic "herd instinct" (Trotter, 1919).

Some have said that religion is a need for meaning and control but that it involves anxieties and fears, although William James, in his book Habit, claimed it was nothing more than habit (James, 1890, p. 51).

Religion seems to be much more than instinct and habit. It is a nurturing process, according to Taylor, in Changing Patterns of Religious Education. "The task of religious nurture is to bring people into a way of living and being" (Taylor, p. 74). "This way of life includes Christian virtues, faith, hope for a better world and the grace of God to be a pilgrim" (Taylor, p. 75). The pilgrim is a person who can move with God. They are free to be where they are needed and they contain a simple love for others (Wentz, Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion, p. 23-38).

The importance of religion, particularly to youth, is constantly being discussed because

we are constantly asking, "Why are youth leaving the church?" and "why are Teenagers Rejecting Religion?" (Dudley, Title). If religion has meaning and purpose in life as suggested by Taylor, then there may be answers to these questions, especially since religion seems to have its basic roots in human emotional and moral development.

However, "It is not unusual for children to reject the faith of their parents upon reaching adolescence" (Dudley, Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to do about it, p. 7). Sloat in The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home suggests "Christian values cannot be easily or automatically transferred from one generation to the next" (Sloat, p. 26). It is this transfer process that adults believe is so important to preserve the religion of the culture. But there appears to be a distinct mismatch between the religion of adults and the religion seen as relevant and worthwhile by teenagers, who have probably already labeled religion, as they know it – as belonging to the older generation. Adults (parents, pastor, or teacher) sense that this mismatch is the result of the adolescents' not fully understanding the reality of the world, not "growing-up" and being bad because they don't hold to adult values that seem to be essential for successful survival in the culture and for spiritual development.

Sloat says, "Parents may instill so much fear and guilt along with values that youngsters are afraid to sort out their beliefs. A second problem exists when youngsters accept what their parents have taught them without questioning or evaluating it. Then they are empty, following hollow belief that can easily crumble under pressure. This is especially true when Christian parents do not teach children to think for themselves, or do not even allow them to do so. It is easy for succeeding generations to go along with their parent's teachings, and as a result they live out traditions that have little or no personal meaning" (Sloat, p. 27).

Elkind states in an article called "The Origins of Religion in the Child," which appeared in Review of Religious Research that religion is a normal natural outcome of mental development (Elkind, p. 35-42). We are not born into a spiritual vacuum, and as representatives of society our parents and others offer us their religious solutions. There is an interesting phenomena: religion is like a habit in that it is pervasive and founded on human weakness and deficiency. It is taught in the homes in such a manner that "we believe; we obey; and we usually know enough not to think too deeply about it . . . It is mechanical religion, habitual religion, convenient religion" (Spilka, The Psychology of Religion, p. 17). And it appears that this is what we are passing on as cultural religious tradition.

The Survey

It seems clear why teenagers would reject religion as described by Spilka. But would they abandon religion, a concept so basic to human development to be considered by many as instinctive? In a recent randomly distributed, non-technical survey, 600 North American twelfth grade academy Bible students responded to the question, "How important is religion to you?" (See attached Religious Attitude Survey, Appendix 1). Of the group three quarters said religion was important to them, less than one-tenth said it wasn't, and less than one quarter were undecided. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to learn whether or not teenagers were rejecting religion outright, and if so, what the reasons might be.

Another question attempted to determine whether the importance of religion was positive in their lives. "What is your current attitude toward religion and spiritual things?" There were four choices: rejection, postponement, lukewarmness, and whole-hearted acceptance. What might be evident here is that four-fifths of the teenagers at academies had some positive feeling toward religion. They said that it was important to them in some way. Twelve of the 600 students rejected religion. Better than one-quarter accepted it whole-heartedly.

Since adults play such an important part in the religious attitudinal development of the

child through child-rearing practices, ministry, and teaching, it was felt to be important to determine which of the three groups may have the greatest impact upon the child. In answer to question number two "Who is the greatest influence on your religious experience?" about one-half of the students indicated that their parents were, less than one-twentieth said the pastor; peers, one-sixth; teachers, one-tenth; and self, one-sixth.

In answer to a follow-up question, "Do you feel you were able to receive (if you desired) a Christian experience from: Bible class, family interaction, church, and school Bible texts?" the student responses were Bible class and church by a substantial margin. Many students said there was no religious family interaction, many with no worships in the home. Is it possible, then, to assume that the greatest influence from parents is non-spiritually modeled behavior? And that if the student felt he/she was to receive a Christian experience, it must be in Bible class or at church.

If Bible class has one of the greatest potentials for religious and spiritual development, then Bible teachers become important persons in the religious and spiritual development of teenagers. According to the survey, students note the effectiveness of Bible teachers on the basis of their personal Christian growth.

BIBLE TEACHERS AND BIBLE CLASSES

Adventist education exists because of the perceived need to transmit denominationally specific information--doctrines and culture--to its children in order to preserve the special worldview of Adventism. As a result, Adventists operate the second largest parochial school system in the world.

Although S. D. A. schools have a great training potential according to the survey, the teachers score rather low (one-tenth of the responses). It is essential that teachers begin to understand this potential and improve their image in promoting spirituality.

Part of the problem, may be that pastors staff Bible classrooms rather than college and university trained Bible teachers. The reason for this may be the inadequate numbers of students selecting Bible as a teaching area. In addition students often have transferred from theology, to education bringing with them a theological mindset.

The students were asked on the survey to respond to an open-ended question; "Bible teachers are:" Though there were some positive comments the general responses were:

"Doing the job and no more."

"Some are sure they are right about everything."

"Not much different from our other teachers."

"My Bible teachers operated the class like a class--learn this and that."

"They never really tried to get you to want to study for yourself or ask questions."

"I sometimes questioned their spirituality."

"They don't do a lot for me spiritually."

Others included, boring, useless classes, one point of view--their own, give lectures, don't interact and don't give you a Christian experience.

To the question, "What do you feel is the most important thing for a Bible teacher to do in class?" the responses were:

"To speak to the level of the class."

"To help you discover things about yourself."

"To turn the student on to religion."

"To care for their students."

"To make the Bible more meaningful for us today."

"To be a real Christian."

"To make clear to us what Christianity and life is really about."

"Not to stand up in front of a class of teenagers and preach."

Others included, to show love, to give the class a spiritual blessing, to show how to live a Christian life and to treat us with respect.

We often shortchange the ability of teenagers to understand for themselves what their religious experience needs in order to become their own and for it to be relevant in their lives.

There seems to be a plan message from teenagers to the adults who try to control them that they have the ability to intuitively feel and know what they need or what may be the answer to the fulfillment of their personal spiritual condition. They have made a statement that they need care, love, an understanding of God, relevancy and an adult model, whether it be parents, pastor, or teacher.

The question "How should a Bible class be taught?" was asked. The majority of students felt that there should be time for significant discussion, that doctrine should not be forced, and that there should be a relaxed environment for free interaction on issues that will affect daily living and eternal life. Classes should be taught with an open mind, lively, involve Bible discovery, teach ideas not facts, not be too technical, and come from the teacher's heart and experience.

A large segment of the responses were in favor of relevant religious experience and relevant Bible-based discussion as the primary foci. There was significant concern regarding overuse of lectures and textbooks, and concern that teachers hesitated to deviate from either in order to talk about what teenagers felt they needed.

The last question on the teacher and the Bible class was personal: "What do you feel is the most important thing to be gained from Bible class?" The question was intended to check their inclination toward what religion might mean to them given a nurturing, spiritual environment.

The following quotes were typical:

"To know how to live a Christian life."

"A closer walk with God."

"To develop a closer friendship with Christ."

"To hold on to whatever religious experience I presently have."

Other comments were: to develop a better Christian experience, a good religious attitude, love for others and myself. The over-riding message was that teenagers are really concerned about their spiritual condition and about religion.

With the information from the survey, other questions arise. What should a Bible teacher be like in terms of personality, spiritual condition, and other characteristics? What teaching methods would be most desirable in a Bible classroom? Can every teacher who chooses to teach Bible, effectively use these methods?

THE TEACHER AND THE METHOD

First, let it be postulated that not every teacher should be a Bible teacher, contrary to Gaebelein's suggestion in The Pattern of God's Truth: The Integration of Faith and Learning, that devoted Christian teachers with competencies in the disciplines would be able to replace Bible teachers (Gaebelein, p. 49). His statement, "no Christian education (can exist) without Christian teachers" (Gaebelein, p. 37) is preferable. But no modify this statement we might say, "no relevant Bible classes should be taught without exceptional Bible teacher."

The first basic consideration of this exceptionality must be personality. Some religious psychologists think that two kinds of religious personalities occur in all people: Intrinsic-committed personality, and Extrinsic-consensual personality. "Intrinsic-committed religion regards faith as a supreme value in its own right. It is oriented toward a unification of being, it takes seriously the commandment of brotherhood, and strives to transcend all self-centered needs . . . A religious sentiment of this sort floods the whole life with motivation and meaning" (Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice", p. 455). "Extrinsic religion is describes as strictly utilitarian: useful for the self in granting safety, social standing, solace and endorsement for one's chosen way of life" (Allport, p. 455).

The distinction is more clearly evident from the following table by Spilka:

Intrinsic-committed

Devout, unselfish, stresses love, altruistic, humanitarian, life with meaning, faith of primary importance, sees people as individuals, high self-esteem. Loving, forgiving, positive God. Open to intense religious experience.

Extrinsic-Consensual

Follows rules, convenient. Exclusionist ethnocentric, selfish, self-serving, defensive, expedient. Faith and belief superficial, utilitarian, serves personal wants and desires, sees people in terms of sex, age and status, low confused self-esteem. Stern, vindictive, punitive God. Tends to be closed to religious experience. (Spilka, p. 19).

It seems obvious that Bible teachers would need and want the Intrinsic-committed disposition and that those selecting Bible teachers would require a personality dominant toward the same. Sloat explain the two characteristics in terms of traits as measured by his Profile System. "Some people are more prone than others to struggle with their Christian lives. These are the ones that are quite sensitive (to religion) by nature." On the other hand, "People with strong personalities usually do not hang around the church and struggle with their Christian lives" (Sloat, p. 56-58).

It appears that it ultimately comes down to two potential personality groups for Bible teachers--those that see religion in positive growing ways, and those that do not. Perhaps personality qualities need to be assessed prior to allowing anyone to teach Bible in Adventist schools, but the establishment of criteria could be risky.

The second criteria for selection of potential candidates may well be their adaptability in the classroom. The teenagers in the survey wanted discussion, a relaxed atmosphere, Bible study and caring and loving teachers. Not all teachers are capable of producing these things and it may be that only those intrinsically disposed can do so.

Hunt and King have characterized these two ways of religious dispositions in terms of cognitive potential. It would be well to keep in mind what teachers ideally should demonstrate in the classroom based on this characterization.

Intrinsic-committed

1. Uses abstract principles and sees relationships among things.
2. Discerning, orderly, exact in meaning, clear.
3. Complex, differential uses multiple categories, ideas, sees things as on a continuum.
4. Open, flexible, creative in thinking, thoughtful, tolerant of different ideas and positions.

Extrinsic-consensual

1. Concrete and literal in outlook and judgment.
2. Vague, mechanical, routine, answers. Uses clichés, obscure in meaning
3. Uses few categories, polarized in thinking (e.g., good, bad), simple ideas.
4. Closed, restrictive, intolerant of different viewpoints, rigid, mechanical in thought.

(Hunt and King, "The Intrinsic Extrinsic Concept: A Review and Evaluation", p. 339-356).

Perhaps it is that there is a significant number of parents, teachers, and preachers locked into Extrinsic-consensual thinking. Which may be the result of theological rigidity that has been passed on from generation to generation by those traditional patterns of thinking which often stifle spirituality, or from an over-abundance of adult concern for the teenager.

For example, deBono in Teaching Thinking suggests that "Too often there is a God-like attitude in education. If we could only increase knowledge then we could throw out doubt, indecision, and problems. We pile on the knowledge. Knowledge is easy to teach and knowledge is there . . . education teaches knowledge because there is nothing else to teach. But knowledge is no more a substitute for thinking than thinking is a substitute for knowledge. In most practical situations of life knowledge is never going to be complete, so thinking is going to be needed" (deBono, p. 14).

It seems evident that if we are to meet teenager needs by assisting them in the development of a personal system of evaluating religion, they then must have the tools for thinking through the elements of religion.

If teachers cannot operate by using methodologies that permit this process to happen, then we will always "teach as we were taught." States deBono, "Above all, education has to be a practical system . . . For every traditional subject (Bible in the case of S.D.A. education) there are teachers used to teaching those subjects" (deBono, p. 221). "Used to" are the key words. They insinuate being locked into the traditional ways that Bible has been taught-perhaps extrinsic consensually.

Another criteria might be on learning and teaching styles, and again there is a comparison to personality styles. Kathleen Butler states that, "Teaching style is a set of attitudes and actions that open a formal and informal world of learning to students. It is a subtle force that influence student access to learning and teaching by establishing perimeters around acceptable learning procedures, processes and products. The powerful force of the teacher's attitude toward students as well as the instructional activities used by the teacher shape the learning/teaching experience and require of the teacher and student certain mediation abilities and capacities. Thus, the manner in which teachers presents themselves as human beings and receives learners as human

beings is an influential upon the student's lives and learning as the daily activities in the classroom" (Butler, Learning and Teaching Style in Theory and Practice, p. 51-52). Anthony E. Gregorc says there are four styles to learning and that the teacher needs to be aware of his/her own style and those of the students. This is one more example of the need for professional awareness in teaching, because teaching styles parallel personality styles. Those who have closed personality styles will certainly tend to have closed teaching styles. Those with closed styles are probably the teachers who will have difficulty in Bible classes. (Gregorc, Gregorc Style Delineator, 1982).

Blamires in The Christian Mind: How should a Christian Think, says we are to think Christianly (Intrinsically-committed). In the following are two examples that may reflect the type of methodology that would explain what he means (Blamires, p. 44).

In a book entitled, Teaching for Results, Findley B. Edge, says, "Jesus came, lived and taught. His matchless message and dynamic teaching burst through the hard crust of religious traditionalism . . . He broke with the traditional authoritative, transmissive education . . . He used reasonableness, profound simplicity, and basic truths of God and the universe" (Edge, p. 3). "In His day, Jewish education consisted mainly in memorizing portion of the Scriptures and in learning the traditional interpretations . . . Jesus recognized that memorizing was not all that was necessary.

The danger of a transmissive type of education is that the individual may learn facts about religion without experiencing them" (Edge, p. 4). Edge continues, "He encouraged and stimulated his disciples to think for themselves. He developed in His followers the ability to solve problems which life presented" (Edge, p. 4). "One of the truly amazing features of the educational ministry of Jesus was the freedom which He allowed His learners" (Edge, p. 5).

Teacher training institutions must begin to review and change methodological direction. We have constantly been reminded that there is a "blueprint" for schools. There is also one of teachers. The Master Teacher is the example. He spoke in a simple language so that all could understand. He completely identified with his listener's interests and happiness. His illustrations were appropriate, and His word sympathetic and cheerful. He would turn thoughts from artificial to the natural. His mingled with them and showed them He cared. His instruction was confined to the needs of their own condition in practical life. (White, Ministry of Healing, p. 23, 24, 54, 143, 448).

Even with the above as a guide for methods in bible teaching, we will probably do as deBono has discovered, "if you give us (teachers) something simple we shall not be impressed by it because we shall claim we do it anyway.

If you give us something complicated we shall be impressed by its seriousness but unable to use it because it is complicated" (deBono, p. 25).

This is not a treatise to eliminate all tests, all courses, all requirements, or all restrictions that confine learners (Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, p. 151). It is a call to develop a new vision of teaching--a strategic process in which the teacher teaches not only content but uses the strategies required by that content to make it meaningful, integrated and transferable. Teachers must use strategies that focus on the student and whatever it takes to do the job (ASCD, Strategic Teaching and Learning: Cognitive Instruction in the Content Areas, vii). "For too long, most considerations of teaching have been confined to a particular content area. . . little attention has been directed to what strategies students need in order to learn . . . (and) what teachers (can) do to help students learn how to learn" (ASCD, p. 161).

Jesus' process was so simple. If peasants understood it, then why is it so difficult for teachers and professors to understand and pass it on to intellectually and spiritually growing teenagers.

STATEMENT TOWARD SOLUTIONS

1. That all teachers (elementary through college) be instructors and models of spirituality and Christian life style.
2. That teachers (elementary through college) be thoroughly trained in a variety of methods that work for Bible classes, particularly those that allow freedom to think and dialogue, and that allow for the simplicity of Christ's model.
3. That pre-training screening be considered to insure that prospective Bible teachers are Intrinsically-committed, and to insure that the culture of Adventism is being transmitted in the most effective way, but that it still considers the needs of the teenagers.
4. To become aware of the needs and concerns of teenagers, to listen to what they are saying they need, and to care for and love them.
5. To note that Adventist schools are different and that they exist for the purpose of passing on church culture and doctrine, but that this transmission be integrated throughout the school program, not just embedded in religion classes and morning worships.
6. To consciously make an effort to avoid forcing adult values and adult behaviors on teens who are already non-receptive of those values and behaviors.

7. To develop a strategic teaching and learning program in Bible content and instruction.

"Education is more than just classes and books, tests and grades (and certainly not a pulpit). It is more than teachers transferring information to students. It is more than simply filling human memory banks with knowledge. Real education is preparation for life--life here and now and life hereafter" (White, Education, Backcover).

APPENDIX I

RELIGION ATTITUDE INVENTORY

Please respond honestly and openly to the following questions:

1. How important is religion to you?
Not important 1 2 3 4 5 Very important
2. Who was/is the greatest influence on your religious experience: Check one only
 - a. Parents' _____
 - b. Pastor _____
 - c. Peers _____
 - d. Teacher _____
 - e. Self _____
 - f. others _____
3. What is your current attitude toward religion and spiritual things?
 - a. Rejection _____
 - b. Postpone _____
 - c. lukewarm _____
 - d. accept wholeheartedly _____
4. Do you feel you were able to receive (if you desired) a Christian experience from: (check that apply)
 - a. Bible class _____ yes _____ no If no, why not? _____
 - b. Family interection i.e. worship _____ yes _____ no If no, why not? _____
 - c. Church _____ yes _____ no If no, why not? _____
 - d. School Bible texts _____ yes _____ no If no, why not? _____
5. Of the years you've spent in SDA schools, which do you feel had the greatest positive import on your Christian experience?
 - a. Elementary 1 – 6 _____
 - b. Junior high 7 – 9 _____
 - c. Secondary 10 – 12 _____
6. Bible teachers are: (short paragraphs regarding how they operate a class, their spirituality care for students, etc..)
7. What do you feel the most important thing for a Bible teacher to do in class is?
8. How should a Bible class be taught?
9. What do you feel is the most important thing to be gotten from a Bible class (Personally)?
10. Which of the following do you believe has occurred in your life?
 - a. Adults force religion _____
 - b. Peers antireligious influence _____
 - c. Have had time to decide spiritual things for myself _____
 - d. Adults supportive _____
 - e. Teachers' negative influence _____
 - f. Teachers' positive influence _____
11. What would it take to help students be spiritually motivated? (If more space is needed for answers, please use the back of the sheet).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allport, G. W., "The Religious Context of Prejudice", *J. for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1966, 5, 447-457.
- Blamires, Harry, The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think, Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1978
- Butler, Kathleen A., Learning and Teaching Style in Theory and Practice, Gabriel Systems, Inc., Maynard, Mass., 1984.
- deBono, Edward, Teaching Thinking, Billing and Sons, Ltd., London, 1976
- Dudley, Roger L., Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to Do About It, Review and Herald Pub. Assoc., Washington, D. C., 1978
- Edge, Findley, B., Teaching for Results, Broadman Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1956
- Elkind, D., "The Origins of Religion in the Child", *Review of Religions Research*, 1970, 12, 35-42.
- Gaebelein, Frank K., The Pattern of God's Truth: The Integration of Faith and Learning, Moody Press, Chicago, 1954.
- Gregorc, Anthony, Gregorc Style Delineator, Gabriel Systems Inc., 1982.
- Hunt, R. A. and King, M. B., "The Intrinsic Extrinsic Concept: A Review and Evaluation", *J. for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1971, 10, 339-356.
- James, W., Habit, Henry Holt, New York, 1980.
- Postman, Neil and Weingartner, Charles, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, Dell Pub., New York, 1969.
- Sloat, David E., The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home, Thomas Nelson Pub., New York, 1986.
- Spilka, Bernard, The Psychology of Religion, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1985.
- Strategic Teaching and Learning: Cognitive Instruction in the Content Areas, ASCD, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Elmhurst, IL., 1987.
- Taylor, Marvin J. (Editor), Changing Patterns of Religious Education, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1983.
- Trotter, W., Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War, MacMillan, New York, 1919.
- Wentz, Richard E., Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion, Mercer University Press, Macon, GA., 1987.
- White, E. G., Education, Pacific Press, Boise, ID., 1952.
- White, E. G., The Ministry of Healing, Pacific Press, Boise, ID., 1942.