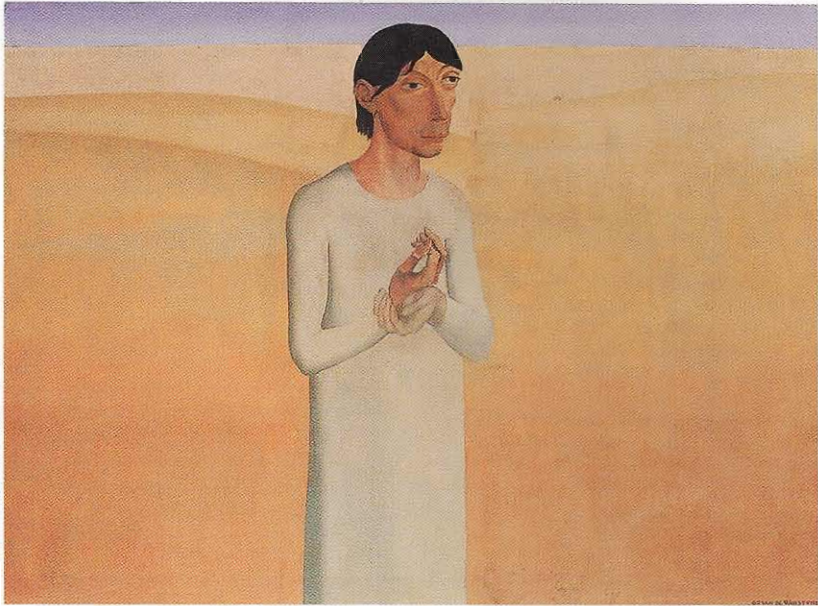


Religious Education as Practical Theology



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PEETERS

To Teach Religion or Not to Teach Religion: Is That the Dilemma?

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There is hesitation, confusion and perplexity in the United States as to what to do with religion. Reactions vary. There is empathy for learning religion but not for teaching it. In some settings, there is fear of evangelizing. While in others, it is explicitly assumed and advocated. In some circles, the *meaning* of “to teach religion” is understood as a confessional act. In other circles, the meaning is nearly the reverse, or simply a blur. In the US, we are in a dilemma as to whether to teach religion or not. And, I suspect the situation is not unique to the US.

Three brief examples will illustrate the muddled confusion:

1. In the Spring semester 1994, I was assigned to teach a course titled, *Toward a Theology of Christian Marriage*, on the undergraduate level. Some thirty-five students enrolled. My operating assumptions were: The setting is a classroom in a school; the content for engagement is marriage from a Christian perspective; the process is academic discussion and critique. Shortly before mid-term, I discovered not everyone shared my assumptions. We had just completed a unit on sexuality. James B. Nelson's book, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*¹, was a key resource. The text is standard in the progressive and liberal theological tradition. A student approached me a few days before mid-term examinations. He expressed his opposition to the text, its ideological framework and viewpoints. Confessionally, he was a devout practicing Evangelical. The text was a source of temptation, he claimed. It was antagonistic to his fundamentalist hermeneutic. After consultation with his local minister, he requested exemption from the mid-term examination and exemption from studying the text. I refused. Was I correct? What is at stake in teaching religion? What is involved in learning religion? From the teacher's perspective, is it a work of advocacy? From the student's side, is it confessional confirmation? Or, is it something else?

1. J.B. NELSON, *Embodiment. An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis MN, Augsburg, 1978.

2. On June 19, 2000, Edward M. Egan was installed as New York's ninth archbishop at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The ceremony reflected many of the elements that will inevitably shape his tenure as archbishop. In his homily, Egan expressed his hope to be a teacher². He emphasized his role as a teacher of faith and values. Being a teacher, he proclaimed, means working directly to shape the spiritual understanding of the faithful by clearly expounding church doctrine. He cited a national opinion poll (taken several years earlier in April 1994) that showed that more than 60 percent of American Catholics were uncertain of basic a doctrine, that the bread and wine at the Mass are changed into the body and blood of Christ. On this belief, Egan said, there can be "no compromise". What do we mean when we say: "The bishop is the chief teacher in the diocese"? Does he teach by being the primary guardian of doctrinal orthodoxy ("correct believing")? Are his teaching competencies, purposes and assumptions different than the classroom teacher of religion in an archdiocesan high school or Catholic college/university? Are these teaching forms compatible or conflictual? Are they simply variations within a common and assumed confessional stance? Or, are they not? Does the teaching act change according to settings? Does the teaching of religion depend on the mission of the school?

3. During my graduate studies, I enrolled in an intensive inter-session course. It was a deep and rapid immersion into the subject-at-hand. It was also a good way to quickly add three credits to one's transcript! The course topic was titled, Sexuality and the Social Order. The course would change my life and world view. First, I had the experience of being a minority. I was one of four men in a class of thirty-one. Second, the course was my introduction to feminism and feminists. It was an experience in transformational learning. One element in the course, however, unsettled me. As the classes progressed, assigned texts tended to be left aside. A personalistic group pedagogy took over. It represented a turn to the subject. The importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge was recognized. Permission and encouragement was given to self-expression, self-revealing, emotional unloading and confessional declarations. Psychic turmoil, sexual violence, emotional hurts, incest and sexual ambiguity were shared with all. In retrospect, it seemed like a forerunner of an Oprah Winfrey or Sally Jesse Raphael afternoon TV talk show. At one stage, the professor asked the four men to excuse themselves from the class because the women had "female stuff to work

2. *New York Times*, June 20, 2000, pp. A1 & B10.

on". As the course turned more into a form of therapeutic encounter, I felt more ill-at-ease. The dynamics seemed more appropriate in a counseling setting or in a church confessional³. Is the classroom of the school the place to work on psychic turmoil? Is it an area for acts of confession? Can we replace the school desk with the psychologist couch? We may be living human documents, but is classroom teaching a therapy session? What kind of space is the classroom? Is it a place where personal grief is traded for consolation? Or, is it something else?

This essay will attempt to unclutter, distinguish and clarify the issues at stake in the three examples noted. The focus of my attention is to uncover the meaning(s) of "to teach religion". The technology of teaching does not claim my primary interest here; nor does the disposition of the learner/student to learn; nor does the impact of social and cultural forces on the learning situation. These are, of course, vital components to consider in every educational context. Contemporary literature on schooling and (practical) theology is attending extensively to these poles⁴. But I wish to look at the issues from the other side, that is, from the perspective of the teacher, or to be more precise, from the side of the act of teaching. I will explore the meaning of the verb "to teach" and its object "religion" as they intermingle, interplay and intersect in contemporary United States. This particular US embodiment, however, may have universal implications.

Specifically, I will explore the meaning(s) of to teach religion in two settings: first, in Public or government sponsored schools and, secondly in Parochial or church sponsored schools. I will attempt to untangle the meaning(s) in each of these educational arenas and their respective interrelationship. Our exploration, however, begins with the unveiling of the meanings of the verb "to teach", a naming of its multiple forms, languages and settings. Prior to linking the verb to teach with its object religion, a comprehensive interpretative framework and consistent linguistic pattern is needed. I will propose an emerging meaning of religious education as a heuristic framework. Whether one conceptualizes this project, as a form of practical theology is a question I keep in abeyance until the conclusion of the essay.

3. On the risks of personalistic teaching methodologies, see K. HOMAN, *Hazards of the Therapeutic. On the Use of Personalistic and Feminist Methodologies*, in *Horizons* 24 (1997) 248-264.

4. For an excellent new resource see the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion*, published by Blackwell Publishers in cooperation with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

1. Liberating the Verb "To Teach"

Reclaiming the richest meaning of the verb "to teach" will involve a four step process. First, the moral dilemma at the heart of teaching is raised. Second, in an attempt to solve the dilemma of teaching, a variety of teaching acts or forms are named and recognized. The third step is to distinguish among the many forms of speech in teaching. And, fourth, the task is to match one of these languages or a pattern of languages with the appropriate institutional setting. When the latter is accomplished the dilemma is solved and teaching can become a moral act⁵.

The Moral Dilemma of Teaching

Teaching is an important test case of whether we understand what education is. Yet, it is the learning aspect of education that gets attention today. We have prolific discussion on the student's readiness to learn, dispositions to learn, and social-cultural influences on the learning process. Little or no ambivalence is expressed about learning. In contrast, the nature of teaching goes nearly unexplored. Teaching and learning are taken to be separable processes. Learning is treasured. Teaching seems to be an optional extra or an oppressive interference. Why is this so?

Gabriel Moran proposes a thesis: people are uneasy with the very idea of teaching. At some level of consciousness and conscience, they sense a moral dilemma in the idea of teaching⁶. They have an ethical problem with the activity and have a deep suspicion that it is an immoral activity. Teaching is equated with the exercise of power by an adult over a vulnerable child. It is identified with a powerful adult trying to control the thinking of a powerless neophyte. It is telling the young the truth. Moran traces this reductionist meaning of teaching to its seventeenth century roots. John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau did not eliminate the term, but they narrowed its meaning to a rationalistic core devoid of religious meaning. Its chief embodiment in the modern world is a classroom. In educational literature, it is assumed that teaching is an explanation from the front of a classroom. It becomes confused with a certain

5. The recent work of Gabriel Moran is a major inspiration for this section of the essay. I note in particular my indebtedness to his *Showing How. The Act of Teaching*, Valley Forge PA, Trinity Press International, 1997.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-33.

arrangement of power – one of great inequity. In addition, the coercive influence is exercised mainly or exclusively through words. It seems only reasonable, then, with this domesticated meaning, to shift the attention to learning.

There are two places in particular in modern educational literature where teaching has an explicitly negative history: It is either attacked or avoided. This is most obvious in the literature on "moral education" and "adult education". In the literature on "moral education", teaching is suspect. At one end of the pendulum, it comes under direct attack (for example, "value clarification"). The teacher should never say something is right or wrong. At the other end, teaching becomes moot as "moral development" is subtly affirmed. In Piaget's framework, to teach morality to the child is almost a contradiction. The task of the parent or the schoolteacher is to foster discussion and get out of the way. Teaching receives its poorest press in contemporary "adult education" literature. "Adult education" literature intentionally abandoned the term pedagogy. If pedagogy or teaching is the exercise of power over a child, then, adults want no part of it. A new vocabulary was invented. "Androgogy" was and is the centerpiece of the literature. "Adult education" proceeds to define and demarcate itself over against the child, the teacher and religion. The assumption was and is: children need teachers, but adults need "mentors", "facilitators", "guides" or "counselors". The moral dilemma associated with teaching is palpable on nearly every page.

The Variety of Teaching Acts

We need a rich meaning of teaching to discuss religious education. At the same time, the contemporary practice(s) of religious education can unveil a more adequate meaning of teaching. Most writers on teaching are aware that they should not equate teaching with classroom instruction. However, after this initial acknowledgement, they proceed to discuss the activities of a schoolteacher in a classroom. The result is that most kinds of teaching disappear, and with it, much of the language, imagery, and techniques for improving classroom instruction. Classroom teaching needs a wider context of teaching. When it lacks that, it can indeed become coercive and negative. The initial turn toward solving the moral dilemma of teaching is the recognition of the variety of teaching acts. It is helpful to focus on the act or event of teaching and to ask: what exactly does a teacher do when engaging in the act of teaching? A sense of history and geography is helpful to arrive at a

clearer answer. Etymologically, to teach, means to “show how”. It means to show someone how to do something. It is captured in the American pragmatic sense of “know-how”. A teacher not only knows something but also knows how to show the knowledge or skills to someone else. Most comprehensively, to teach is to show someone how to live and that includes how to die. Here we can sense, most teaching has a religious dimension. This comprehensive meaning lives on in people’s ordinary speech. They know they are taught everyday in numerous ways. Teaching is a central characteristic of the human animal.

Teaching and learning, then, should be viewed as poles within a single process. Learning always implies teaching. People learn things because they have been taught. The proof that teaching exists is the existence of learning. Learning, however, may not always follow from teaching. But, teaching is showing how and learning is responding to this showing. The relation of teaching-learning is a cooperation in power that leads toward mutuality. Gabriel Moran seeks to re-appropriate the meaning of teaching by grounding it in foundational forms of teaching that occur with little or no conscious intent and with few if any human words⁷. In other words, most of the teaching in the world is nonverbal and unintentional. It is communal, symbolic, physical showing how. Every religious tradition reminds us that the community teaches. It teaches by being an example – by demonstrating (showing how) a way of life: this is the way to live and to die. Teaching goes on everyday in the way the community and its traditions function. Virtue is learned when adults and children grow up in a virtuous community. Teaching here includes a wide range of people doing a variety of things in diverse settings with various groups. Intentionality and the verbal are for the most part in the background.

The moral problem of teaching begins to surface, however, when an individual is designated as “teacher” and the teaching is consciously intended. When the teaching is of a physical act (swimming, dancing, bicycle riding), the learner can receive precise directions. If the learner shows a willingness to try again and again, the signs are that the teaching is not oppressive. Speech here functions as choreography of the body, and the moral problem is quickly resolved. However, there can be teaching in which speech takes center stage. Speech becomes the focal point of the teaching. Human language can be viewed as human activity or movement and, consequently, the object of teaching. In other

7. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 34-58.

words, we have the human capacity to distance ourselves from our own speech. This is both the glory and the danger of the human. As speech moves to the center, the great danger is that it can lose its rootedness in bodily life. Some academic teaching (and writing) stumbles into this pitfall. Speech can never lose its connection to the body. It draws power by being situated at the center of bodily life. Speech, in this case, can still be viewed as choreography – precisely indicating movement to someone who can accept or reject the direction. This may lead to reshaping or redesigning the person’s relation to the community. The redesign or reshaping however, may be of the speech itself. What best goes on in classrooms is this redesigning of linguistic patterns. The reshaping of the movement of speech holds center stage. But human language can be used for many purposes. To resolve the moral dilemma of teaching, we need to distinguish between forms of speech in teaching, and to match the appropriate form with the appropriate institutional setting.

The Languages of Teaching

Before a teacher begins to teach, he or she needs to ask why are these people in front of me? The question is critical for each: teacher, parent, coach, preacher, counselor, kindergarten teacher, teacher of religion, university professor. Under what assumptions are these people present? What kind of license to speak have they given me? What can I say that will relate to their bodily lives? What is appropriate (moral)? What is inappropriate (immoral)? The basis on which an individual or group appears before a teacher signifies a moral consent to a particular form of discourse. Much of the misunderstanding surrounding the term “to teach religion” arises when people are confused about the nature of the institution they are in. Why are they assembled? What have they consented to? What language form is operating? Toward what is it directed? When the answer to these questions is unclear, the consent of the people gathered in front of the teacher is sometimes blurred.

Gabriel Moran’s most original contribution, in this regard, is his delineation of three groups or families of languages for discussing teaching. He names them the homiletic, the therapeutic, and the academic⁸. The homiletic and the therapeutic forms of speech are opposite in many

8. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 83-145; see also ID., *Religious Education as a Second Language*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1989, pp. 69-80.

ways. The contrast is based upon a difference in relation to *end*, that is, a good it wishes to reach. The homiletic has an end in view. The therapeutic does not. Both languages can be effective and moral in acts of teaching when used in the appropriate setting. They need, however, to be held in a healthy tension. The setting for academic speech is distinctive and circumscribed. The academic is, as it were, one step removed from ordinary life. It overlaps the homiletic and therapeutic. Communal / bodily life is mediated to the academic through the latter two languages. Academic speech can be powerful in transforming the world and redesigning people's lives. It simply needs the right setting. I will now layout in more detail the nature of each linguistic form.

Homiletic Speech

The best example of homiletic speech is the church sermon. However, the homiletic, as a way of speaking, includes more than preaching. Representative of this first family of languages is storytelling, lecturing and preaching. Homiletic speech presupposes a community and arises from a community. The community has convictions, an agreed-upon text. The end, or good to be attained, is known to the group. This family of languages is "rhetorical", that is, the intention is to persuade people to act on the basis of their (already-accepted) beliefs. The teacher in this situation steps into the center of the community, enable people to tap into their past, retrieve what underlies their beliefs, so as to energize them in the present... toward an end in the future. Moran writes, "The homilist's or preacher's job is both to remind the community of what it has agreed upon and to bring out implications of that agreement. Thus, the homilist is not mainly concerned with providing new information to a community. The point of homiletic speech is to arouse people to action beyond the assembly, to inspire people to get up from the seat and change the world for the better"⁹.

Storytelling is one form of homiletic speech. Communities develop stories (fairy tales, myths, literary fiction) that embody who they are, what their agreements are, what are good and bad. The homilist teaches by telling the story. He or she adds a layer of commentary on the (communal) text. When the story is told well, it can spark the imagination and inspire the reshaping of the communal life. Lecturing is a second form of homiletic speech. Academics may be surprised to find it here. To lecture means "to read". It is a particular kind of reading for an

9. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), p. 70.

instructive or didactic purpose. It usually requires a ritual setting, personal involvement in the message, carefully crafted words, and appeal to reason. The lecture aims to convince and change the audience. The lecture can be an effective form of teaching, but contrary to university custom, it has little or no place in the classroom of a school. Preaching, for the most part, is preaching to the converted. It is an act of rhetoric persuasion. The community has an inner language and a text that expresses the community's beliefs. The preacher steps into the pulpit to stir the hearts of the people, to exhort them to keep their commitments and to go out and resist the injustice in the world. Preaching is to be affirmed and valued as a form of teaching. When the conditions are right, it is a powerful form of pedagogy. In other circumstances, it is completely inappropriate.

Homiletic speech is indispensable in some educational settings. However, where it flourishes, there is little space for critical thinking. Homiletic teaching can become vulnerable to manipulation. Stories can be romanticized, lectures dogmatic, and sermons indoctrinative. How does one protect the community from these impositions and violations? The only sure prevention is the introduction and rich presence of the other two families of languages.

Therapeutic Speech

The best example of therapeutic speech is the work of the professional psychotherapist. However, the therapeutic, as a way of speaking, includes more than what transpires in the therapist's office. Acts of praising and condemning, welcoming and thanking, confessing and forgiving, mourning and comforting come under the canopy of therapeutic speech¹⁰. The therapeutic is rooted in communal and bodily life. That is, it emerges out of the nonverbal realm of life. Unlike the homiletic, that accepts and celebrates the communal text, the therapeutic attempt to subvert it. It assumes the community is fragmented and the individual within it needs healing. Therapeutic speech seeks to undermine the individual's text. There are obstacles to wholeness in his or her way. The function of therapeutic speech is to remove these obstacles for the purpose of healing the individual within the community. It aims at quieting the interior. The language is restorative: it soothes, calms, heals. It is indispensable to human life, and central to teaching. The teacher in this situation is healer.

10. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 103-123.

Therapeutic languages tend to be indirect and even illogical. It is a form of speech that operates in ordinary everyday life. It does not go directly at its object – like homiletic speech. Rather, its language is more silence than sound. It tries to get us to come to terms with our personal and collective conflicts. In therapy, the client does most of the talking. The process of talking unearths hidden texts, enables the individual to come to terms with them and bring them into a healing experience. The therapy is in the talking. On the part of the therapist, however, the speech tends to be minimalist. He or she refrains from pronouncements on how the world ought to be. In fact, therapeutic speech distrusts proclamations and is suspicious of speech. It calls attention to the roots of speech and how we can console ourselves with our own language games. It seeks to free us from our egocentric predicament. Moran writes, "In those situations where people need healing words, the therapeutic is appropriate. One uses speech to soothe, to relieve feelings of anger, guilt, or sorrow ... In therapeutic speech we temporarily suspend some of the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral standards for the sake of reconciliation. In therapeutic speech the aim is not achieving an object of choice but reestablishing the ability to choose"¹¹. The assumption is: there has been a rupture in the life of the community. The therapeutic family of languages seeks to recreate that world.

Sometimes in life, in particular situations, therapeutic speech is urgently necessary. It can be a valuable and vital form of speech in teaching people how to live (and how to die). However, there is a danger. The danger is twofold: (1) therapeutic speech in the wrong context can be counterproductive; and (2) the hegemony of therapeutic speech in society can cloud our visibility to vital areas of life. We can avoid these dangers by (1) using the therapeutic in its appropriate setting, and (2) by introducing as complementary the other two families of languages.

Academic Speech

The best example of academic speech is classroom instruction. However, the academic, as a way of speaking, includes discourse beyond the walls of the school. Discussions with colleagues, friends and parishioners could get into raising questions and examining one's presuppositions. Academic speech, on the other hand, requires a specific set of conditions that may be difficult to establish outside the classroom of a school. This

11. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 74-75.

family of languages includes dialectic discussion and academic criticism¹². Academic speech is the use of speech for critical understanding. Here speech moves to center stage and is examined in relation to it. The act of teaching, in this case, is speech about speech. The teacher employs academic discourse to turn speech back on itself and to investigate its assumptions, biases and meanings. In order to achieve this, a certain distancing from ordinary life is needed. Academic speech is disinterested speech. To engage in it, we temporarily put on hold our involvement and convictions, as far as we are capable, to examine assumptions, contexts, blind spots. On the other hand, the academic teacher is an advocate. The advocacy is linguistic. He or she advocates how to speak so that greater understanding is possible.

Academic discourse presumes the homiletic and therapeutic. The latter two mediate communal / bodily life to the academic. Whereas the homiletic affirms the text of the community and the therapeutic subverts it, the academic aims to talk about the nature and meaning of particular texts. The main question it raises is what do the texts mean. It has no end beyond that. Moran writes, "the homilist says: 'We must believe and act upon the agreed text'; the therapist says: 'We must be free from a text that dominates us without our choice'. The academic teacher says, 'Accept no text uncritically; it might be false. Reject no text uncritically, it might be true'¹³. Teaching academically is not directed to get students to believe the text or to reject (or dissent from) the text. The teacher's task is to playfully and imaginatively direct students to bring their own metaphors under suspicion and passionately propose richer metaphors for understanding. If the teacher succeeds, students may reshape the pattern of their discourse, and, in effect, redesign their world. The schoolteacher, then, does not tell people what to think. Nor is it an exercise in truth telling. It is an invitation to examine their way of speaking. The words of the teacher, students and assigned texts are placed between them. The ground rules are civility and tolerance. Everything else is open to critique. No opinion is uncritically accepted as the truth. The assumption is every statement of belief, every linguistic expression of truth and every viewpoint can be improved upon. This saves the process from being authoritarian.

The classroom is a place for a particular kind of discourse, nothing more and nothing less. Within this family of languages, we can recognize

12. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 124-125.

13. ID., *Religious Education as a Second Language* (n. 8), p. 78.

two forms: dialectical discussion and academic criticism. Dialectical discussion often takes the form of debate. There is a sense of back and forth, a dialogue, with a reflective use of language. Particular attention, however, is directed to the meaning of the words in the dialogue. The dialogue, as an oral exchange, can only bear fruit if the participants are willing to listen to the words of the other, and the voice and otherness of the assigned text. Texts that tend to preach or be dogmatic defeat the purpose of the academic. Good texts need to leave open the possibility of imagining different viewpoints and alternative worlds. Dialectical discussion is oral debate where the movement of speech is the (inter)play of ideas. This prepares the participants for academic criticism.

Classrooms are designed to teach people to be skeptical. They are places to cultivate an attitude of questioning everything. Academic criticism can be a powerful form of teaching language in the service of this cause. What is called into question is language itself. The classroom is an arena of criticism. The established world or assumed truth is called into question. It is the student's written and spoken words that are the direct object of concern – not the person. The academic dialogue is between the teacher and the students. Both are participants. Assuming the teacher is competent, a further prerequisite for a valuable exchange is that students are in touch with a variety of sources for the topic at hand. In other words, students are required to bring some formed knowledge to the arena of criticism. If they don't, there will be no genuine dialogue. Students are invited to place their (informed) words on the table. Their words become the focus of attention and criticism. The academic search is to understand the words on the table between teacher and students. The task is to distinguish meanings in a way that leads to greater understanding. The teacher does not describe or prescribe. He or she does not try to change the student or the student's thinking, only the student's words. The teacher is advocate, but the advocacy is for a certain way of speaking. The schoolteacher's job is to propose a reshaping of the student's words. That is what is appropriate and academically permissible (moral).

Academic speech, then, is concerned with meaning, with intellectual understanding. It questions the adequacy of every form of expression. This critique if it has communal support does not end in negativity. Rather, it can facilitate the emergence and flowering of new meaning. That is the purpose of classroom teaching. When academic criticism is absent, the classroom is simply not functioning as a genuine classroom. This form of teaching can never substitute for the other two, but when

it complements the homiletic and the therapeutic, it can be powerful and transformative in people's lives. However, the central issue remains: when and where is each form of speech appropriate.

Matching Languages with Educational Settings

The final step in resolving the dilemma of teaching is fitting the appropriate family of languages to the appropriate institutional setting. Each educational setting has one or several forms of language appropriate to it. Each setting has specific limits that protect the learner. A moral problem arises when an inappropriate pattern is used. Each institution signals to the learner the family of languages suitable to it. The learner (parishioner, client, student) by entering the institution (parish, therapist's office, school) signifies what language he or she is ready for. In a word, he or she consents to a particular form or a few forms of speech.

When parishioners congregate in a church they consent to homiletic speech. Preaching and storytelling is what they have come to expect. Imaginative and creative storytelling and preaching is what the congregation deserves. These are important languages to every religion. The teacher is obliged to make them accessible. The teacher here may be the preacher, parent, catechist, or lecturer. Those assembled believe in the text. The teacher's task is to enable its members to reflect on its readings and to live up to their commitments. Homiletic speech can function in and outside of church. When all the conditions are right, it can be one of the most powerful forms of teaching. It can be morally appropriate and educationally effective. However, when the right conditions are absent, homiletic language can be morally offensive and educationally counterproductive. It is no accident that sermonizing and preaching have, at times, negative connotations. One does not enter a therapist's office to be lectured. On entering the classroom of a school, one does not consent to being preached at. Therapy is not lecturing. Classroom instruction is not preaching. The homiletic has almost no part to play when the classroom teacher is engaged in instruction. Teachers of religion can easily ignore this principle when they slip into moralizing and semi-indoctrinative attitudes.

When a client enters a therapist's office he or she consents to therapeutic language. But the therapeutic, as noted above, is not confined to the professional therapist. The therapeutic can operate in congregational life, in family settings and in the arena of the school. Congregations can experience fracture, families may be ripped apart, and students in school

may be wounded. This is the right time for the therapeutic. The teacher's task is to provide comfort, praise, hospitality and rituals for mourning. The aim is to heal, to restore the individual /community to wholeness, so that the ability to choose may be re-established. The teacher here may be the pastor, parent, counselor, spiritual director, chaplain, or schoolteacher. These therapeutic languages are important to all religions. At the right time and place, they are morally appropriate and educationally effective. However, when these conditions are absent, therapeutic speech can be morally offensive and educationally futile. One does not assemble in church on Sunday for therapy. A student does not enter a classroom of a school for therapy treatment. A worship service is not predominantly designed for comforting and consoling. And, therapy should not predominate in the classroom. Teachers of religion who ignore this principle cloud students' view of large areas of life, sacrifice intellectual excellence and pander to students' needs.

When a student enters a classroom in a school he or she consents to a particular kind of discourse, namely, academic speech. Dialectical discussion and academic criticism are what they have come to expect. The schoolteacher is obliged to make them accessible. They are important languages to every religion. While academic discourse can emerge outside the school, the classroom in the school is particularly designed for it. The teaching act here is designed for discussion of ideas and their assumptions. The teacher and students are partners (but not peers) in searching or researching the truth. If the right conditions prevail, the dialogue goes back and forth. The purpose is to move closer to the truth but without fixity, finality or absolutizing. It is academic criticism that keeps open the meaning of words. Its form is interrogative. The students' words, the words of the text and the teacher's words are all subject to public scrutiny. The first question of concern is: What do the words mean? There will be a difference between the intended meaning of the speaker and multiple meanings of what is voiced. This is the space for academic criticism. The teacher asks: What do you mean? Who says so? Why? What are the assumptions? Is there a better way of saying that? The teacher, as advocate, shows and proposes a better way of how to do it. Here, the teacher, par excellence, is the classroom instructor. In the right place and time, academic speech can be the powerful form of teaching, both morally appropriate and educationally effective. However, when these conditions are absent, academic discourse can be educationally counterproductive and morally offensive. A liturgical assembly is not the place for dialectical discussions. A therapist's office, for the most

part, is not suitable for academic criticism. Preaching is not dialectical and therapy is not critique. Academic discourse, like every other language, presumes a community. One can not begin or end with criticism. But, when teachers of religion ignore academic discourse beliefs become dogmatic, interpretations closed and traditions idolatrous.

2. Religion: An Academic Construct

In the title of this essay, religion is the direct object of the verb to reach. In twentieth century English, religion has two distinct and very different meanings: (1) It is a word for a set of practices that particular communities engage in. These (religious) communities, with their beliefs, rituals and moral practices, show a way of life. Religion here is what one lives. (2) Religion is also a word to designate a field of academic inquiry¹⁴. It is an object of scholarly and academic investigation. It is the name of a curriculum subject. Both meanings are well established today, and, both meanings arose together out of the Western Enlightenment. The second meaning is the focus of my attention here and the one I wish to connect to the verb to teach.

Religion is an idea and a concept that was invented in scholarly circles. It appeared as a general idea applicable to a set of things called religions. Religion was adapted as a neutral term by scholars who sought to study particular (religious) communities and compare them to other particular (religious) communities. The focus is on understanding. But one can understand only if one compares. The single act of understanding is directed at multiple objects: the phenomenon of religion. In a world of religious multiplicity, with each group espousing to be the way, religion represents an understanding that the conflicting claims of traditional groups can be examined, critiqued and compared. The concept implies understanding one (or one's own) religious position in relation to the other possibilities. This is a quite recent idea. The claim is: religion can be a subject in the school curriculum. It can stand next to psychology, politics or pharmacology. As an idea (of comparison) and a method (of inquiry) posited by scholars, it represents a commitment to use the mind in a search for truth. This willingness to use the mind to understand one community (e.g. Christians) in light of other people (e.g. Jews) deserves to be called "the study and teaching of religion".

14. G. MORAN, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (n. 8), pp. 123-124.

Where is the appropriate setting for this form of inquiry? The modern classroom in the school is surely one place where it belongs. "It was practically invented for the classroom," notes Moran, "there is no place where religion more comfortably fits than in the academic curriculum"¹⁵. One preaches the Christian message, but one academically teaches religion. The school teacher steps back from the practice of the Christian, Jewish or Buddhist ways of life so as to examine Christian, Jewish or Buddhist discourse. The teaching tools for this activity are dialectical discussion and academic criticism. When used properly these languages open up richer meaning(s). They can be transformative.

3. An Interpretative Framework: Religious Education

Before exploring the state of teaching religion in various settings in the US, I will briefly set a comprehensive context for the discussion. In some of his most recent writings, Moran calls attention to the ambiguity in the term religious education in different parts of the world. He points out the term operates with two different and contrasting meanings on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. There are very good reasons, he claims, why these two distinct realities need to have the same name. His project is to unveil the richest meaning of religious education. This emerging meaning can embrace both sides, honor the distinctiveness of each, and, yet affirm their relatedness¹⁶.

In this comprehensive framework, religious education has two faces. A complete contrast between the two faces would include describing the who, what, how, where, and why of each. This would take us beyond the scope of this essay. However, I will briefly sketch a number of these components. The two faces of religious education can be described as 1) teaching people to be religious in a particular way and, 2) teaching people religion. The two forms have sharply contrasting aims, processes, recipients and settings. The two aspects of religious education are not simply parallel; nor do they locate people in separate compartments. They are necessarily bound together. People need access to both, although at some moments in life one of them is likely to dominate. The first face of religious education is to teach people to live religion i.e.

15. G. MORAN, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (n. 8), p. 124.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-242; see also M. HARRIS & G. MORAN, *Reshaping Religious Education*, Louisville KY, Westminster – John Knox, 1998, pp. 30-43.

a particular religious way of life. This is the educational work of formation, initiation or induction into the practices and mission of the group. In this process, the aim is to teach the recipient to be a devout Catholic, observant Jew or practicing Muslim. One is trying to form new members "in the faith". This is an ancient process familiar to the great religious traditions. Catholics have named it catechesis and Protestants Christian nurture/education¹⁷. This meaning of religious education flourishes in the US. With respect to age, the recipients tend to be children, although there is an emerging recognition that formation can continue throughout life¹⁸. The teacher here is the catechist, preacher, parent and, in fact, the whole community. People accept the community text – or are inquirers or initiands. The teaching languages are mostly homiletic and therapeutic. However, most of the teaching is non-verbal. This is especially true for the moral and /or religious life. The two major teaching forms are liturgy and the works of service. And, the appropriate educational settings are the family, religious community, and the school – but not the classroom of the school. This face of religious education shows peoples how to live. It is the teaching of activities, a set of practices, and a code of conduct and rituals, for immersion into a concrete and particular communal way of life. This form of religious education is indispensable in the (post) modern world. The second face of religious education is to teach religion. Religion here is an academic construct. This is the educational work of stepping back from the practices of a religious way and trying to understand them. This form of education is mostly a matter of the mind. We use the muscles of the mind to explore, question and critique. In this process, the aim is to teach the recipient to understand religion. In order to understand, however, one must compare. Teaching religion aims at understanding one's own tradition in relation to the religious life of others. The aim is not change of behavior but change in understanding. This meaning of religious education flourishes in Great Britain and other parts of the world. In terms of age, this process could begin with older children, increase during the teenage years, and reach its full fruition during the adult years. The teacher here is the schoolteacher. The teaching languages are dialectical discussion and academic criticism. And, the appropriate educational setting is the classroom in the school. In (post) modern times,

17. I trace the history of these terms in my *Communicative Competence and Religious Education*, in *Lumen Vitae* 35 (1980) 75-96.

18. See the US Catholic Bishops Pastoral plan for adult faith formation in their document, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, Washington DC, USCC, 1999.

this form of religious education is indispensable to peace and harmony in the world.

Religious education, then, stands Janus-faced. One side faces practice. The other faces understanding. Each are inextricably related to the other. Practice without understanding can become blind, narrow and prejudicial. Understanding without practice can become abstract, detached, and lacking in appreciation. Of course, not every religious educator can do both kinds of education. Most teachers may devote themselves to accomplishing one of these aims. However, they should know another aim exists. It is in the interplay and integration of the two aims, however, where religious education is most developmentally mature. This is the comprehensive context in which I wish to explore the academic teaching of religion in public schools and religiously affiliated schools in the United States.

4. To Teach Religion in US Public and Church Related Schools

Public School

If my explorations to this stage have been logical, intelligible and credible, the parameters I have set for discussion of the teaching religion in the US are restricted and narrowly circumscribed. There is real strength in this restriction. It can clarify the meaning of the terms under discussion, and, thereby, shed light on the particular form of teaching, its object, and its appropriate setting. This, I hope, has been achieved. There is something quite ironic about the state of religious education in the United States. Even though the contemporary movement and Association, as we know it, was born on these shores¹⁹, religious education tends to fly on one wing here. Religious education can mean many things in the US. It can even function under different labels, but one thing it does not mean is "to teach religion" in a public or state school. In the US, religious education never means a subject in the curriculum of the state school. Yet, the teaching of religion in the context of the school is a crucial part of the field of religious education. The teaching of religion in US public schools is constitutionally permissible and educationally desirable, yet, it hardly yet exists. Why the anomaly?

19. Historical sketches of the movement and Association can be found in K. BARKER, *Religious Education, Catechesis and Freedom*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1981, pp. 25-72, and in S. SCHMIDT, *A History of the Religious Education Association*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1983.

The role of religion in US public schools has always been a topic to stir fiery emotions, controversy and resistance. One might presume that thoughtful discussion on the subject would flourish in educational contexts. However, the opposite is the case. The "taboo" against the schooling in religion has largely been imposed by educators themselves. While a persistent effort has been made by a small group of people over the past four decades to get religion into the curriculum of the public school, progress has been slow²⁰. Minimal signs are discernible on the elementary level. In the high school, some initial promising efforts are emerging. While community colleges currently show the most hope. In some states, children do have the opportunity to study religion as a subject, or to study units on religion within literature, social studies, and other subjects. The state of California, for example, has introduced a curricular model for adding the study of four great religions – Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity to its elementary schools²¹. However, for the most part, the discussion is mired down in fears of law suits and suspicions of indoctrination. The continuing debate on prayer in public school, the posting of the Ten Commandments, and the current focus on character education²² is also distracting from the central issues. The fundamental problem is the framework in which the discussion takes place. The debate is caught in fixed formulas that seriously limit discussion. The result: there is no readily available language in which to situate the question. Before attending to the linguistic framework, however, the ambivalence toward religion in the US needs to be acknowledged.

The United States is one of the most religious places on earth. Religion (as a lived way of life) is omnipresent in the culture. Since World War II about 93% of US people have expressed allegiance to a religious group. Most people actually engage in religious practice. By almost any scale of measurement, this is a very religious nation. This generally comes as a surprise to most first time visitors. But it was not a surprise

20. I note in particular the journal *Religious & Public Education*, published by the National Council on Religion and Public Education.

21. Two noteworthy publications have appeared recently that describe some curricular developments nationwide, namely J.T. SEARS & J.C. CARPER (eds.), *Curriculum, Religion, and Public Education. Conversations for an Enlarging Public Square*, New York NY, Teachers College Press, 1998; W.A. NORD & C.C. HAYNES, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Alexandria VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.

22. On character education see T. LICKONA, *Educating for Character*, New York NY, Bantam, 1991. For a survey of the movement, see R. ROSENBLATT, *Teaching Johnny to Be Good*, in *New York Times Magazine*, April 30, 1995, 36-74.

to Alexis de Tocqueville. He cautioned us not to forget that "it was religion that give birth to the English colonies in America"²³. These religious roots are deep and pervasive today. On the other hand, as Stephen Carter claims in *The Culture of Disbelief*²⁴, religion has been marginalized and trivialized in public life and culture. It has been distorted as idiosyncratic, exotic, and toxic. Carter chronicles the current US obsession of either brushing off religious convictions as the ravings of the fanatic fringe or domesticating them as private pastimes. In academic circles, religious beliefs are treated as exotic. They are ignored because they emanate from a "foreign epistemology". Scientific rationality remains the dominant way of knowing. And, in a therapeutic obsessed culture²⁵, religion is an obstacle to mental health. Non-belief is the public sponsored orthodoxy. One of the ironies, then, in US public life, is that for all our religiosity, a profound ambivalence remain. This is also the case in US public schools.

Religion has always been intertwined with the schools in the United States of America. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a "common faith"²⁶ flowed through the public schooling system. Elements that were presumed to be part of a common religion in the country held a prominent place in the school²⁷. Bible readings became prominent rituals and prayers became common practices. This pattern would prevail until the Supreme Court declared the unconstitutionality of devotional exercises in state school²⁸. But to this day religion blows through the hallways of the public school. What the school will not do with it, however, is reach it. It simply will not take it seriously as a subject in the curriculum. The assumption is the public schools do not teach religion; That task belongs to religious organizations. Logically it follows: the public schools want no part of teaching religion. This is a great educational scandal in the United States. To shed light on this current predicament, it is necessary to draw attention to the artificial and convoluted language that sets the terms for the debate.

The public school shies away from the language of teaching religion. One has to look far and wide for any discussion by school people of the

23. Quoted in ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, *Religion in the Curriculum*, Washington DC, ASCD, 1987, p. 1.

24. S.L. CARTER, *The Culture of Disbelief*, New York NY, Doubleday, 1993.

25. See R. BELLAH et al., *Habits of the Heart*, Berkeley CA, University of California, 1985, esp. pp. 113-141.

26. J. DEWEY, *A Common Faith*, New Haven CT, Yale University, 1934.

27. See J. WESTERHOFF, *McGuffey and His Readers*, Nashville TN, Abingdon, 1978.

28. *Abington versus Schempp*, 1963.

school doing with religion what schools are supposed to do, namely, teach it and study it. The biggest problem is the absence of a language to discuss religion as a normal part of public education. The discourse gets caught up in a particularly artificial jargon. The two phrases which run throughout the literature are: "Teach about religion" and the "objective study of religion". These two phrases structure the current linguistic framework. And, neither phrase is very helpful. The first phrase is taken from a Superior Court ruling of 1963, although the history of the phrase goes back to the 1940's. Justice Arthur Goldberg in *Abington versus Schempp*²⁹ offered the distinction between the "teaching of religion" and "teaching about religion" in the public schools. At the time, this comparison was a useful tool of thought in clearing the way for further discussion of religion in state schools. Unfortunately that discussion was not forthcoming except in scattered instances. The court gave a clear directive with the legally orthodox phrase "teaching about religion". The problem emerged when educators take this legal speech and incorporate it into educational language. This is precisely what transpires in the literature. The authors adopt the prevailing and standard legal distinction. The question and the issue becomes: Is it possible to teach religion in public school? The educational literature declares: No, one may only "teach about religion". The phrase is uncritically repeated ad nauseum. At its best, it failed to clarify the issue with an artificial language. At its worst, it hides the issue by failing to hone out meaningful educational distinctions.

The two phrases "to teach religion" and "to teach about religion" are now set in logical opposition. On the one side, "to teach religion (or the "teaching of religion") is given over to parents and religious bodies. It is identified with religious nurturing, inculcating and proselytizing. On the other side, "teaching about religion" is given over to the public school. It is identified with being objective, intellectual and critical. Here there is a deliberate distancing of the teaching from a properly academic subject called "religion". The phrase "to teach about religion" creates an artificial notion of objectivity. The same could be said of the phrase "the objective teaching of religion". Schooling emphasizes distancing. It seeks to bring a wide perspective to our premises and personal data. The attempt is to get a question or situation in front of us for careful examination. In this sense school "objectifies". To a degree, in schooling, we bracket our biases, interests and viewpoints in order to

29. *Abington versus Schempp*, 1963.

explore other worldviews. This objectivity is required in all teaching and study. However, the words to a degree are critical. Total or complete objectivity is impossible and indeed unadvisable. Some subjective involvement in the subject matter is vital. It is critical for existential relevance and meaningfulness.

This is important particularly when the subject matter is religion. Objective and subjective, however, when applied to religion can do violence to the material. A subjective approach gets eliminated from schools because it is not objective enough. While a purely objective approach reduces religion to a set of cold data. The key is an interplay between the subjective and objective. This kind of teaching and study is appropriately called inter-subjective³⁰. Little progress will be made as long as the discussion on religion in public schools remains captive to clumsy legal phrases and false notions of objectivity. We need to reshape a language of education. In a renewed linguistic framework, an obvious place to examine the meaning of "to teach religion" is the public school.

School is where religion belongs. It can enable the public schools to become more public. It can foster religious literacy, cultivate religious understanding and lessen religious prejudice. Religion, however, has been discriminated against in the public sector of education in the United States. Until schoolteachers embrace religious traditions as meaningful and deeply significant educational content, schools will encourage Balkanization rather than genuine pluralism. Ernest Boyer, a leading national commentator on public education, writes, "While no school should impose religious beliefs or practice, I believe, it is simply unimaginable to have quality education in the nation's schools without including in the course of study a consideration of how religion has been a central thread in the very fabric of the human story, both here and all around the world ... And yet the harsh reality is that in many schools a blanket of silence has smothered this essential study"³¹.

Church Related Schools

School is precisely where religion dwells most comfortably. It is an academic category. As an idea and a method, it represents a commitment to use the mind in search for truth, a truth that transcends all

30. See P. PHENIX, *Religion in Public Education: Principles and Issues*, in D. ENGEL (ed.), *Religion in Public Education*, New York NY, Paulist, 1974, p. 67.

31. E. BOYER, *Teaching Religion in the Public Schools*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 (1992) 515-524, p. 517.

institutions. While schools cannot carry all the burden for the formation and the development of a religious way of life, never-the-less, its limited contribution is vital to intelligent religiousness. Are Christian (Jewish, Muslim) communities in the US committed to religion? Are their church affiliated schools hospitable to the idea and method? Or, are they suspicious and defensive of teaching it? The irony is religiously sponsored schools in the US are as leery of teaching religion as are public schools. They are not yet doing the teaching job in religion that needs to be done. Why is this? The problem is not only in what (content) is taught but in the root metaphor (language) of teaching that undergirds their total educational mission. Both, of course, are related. And, the same problems are shared by Catholic and Protestant schools.

Catholic and Protestant communities give a prominent place to teaching. What is to be taught, however, is usually very restricted. One is expected to teach the Word of God (Bible), Christian Doctrine, the catechism, and the (moral) way. The teacher is also expected to teach by example. Jesus, the teacher, is the paradigmatic reference point³². The New Testament directs the disciples how to pass on a way of life after Jesus has departed. The dilemma was: the founder is gone; so how does the new community engage in traditioning (the process of passing on) a way of life that can be grasped largely through texts? The early church initiated a two step (educational) process: preaching and instruction. First, the word is preached. On the occasion of this announcing, one is called to conversion. Second, when one becomes a member of the assembly, he or she is ready for instruction (teaching) in the details of the faith. The first step is proclamation. The second step is catechetical. In this model, teaching (as instruction) is a follow up to preaching. And, in the terms I have employed above, both are part of the homiletic family of languages. The Christian Churches have largely inherited this educational model. Education is initiation, incorporation, induction into the faith. It is a process of religious socialization, enculturation and maturation in the faith. On the Protestant side, the root metaphor is *nurture*. On the Catholic side, the directing metaphor is *formation*. The New Testament did not advocate the teaching of religion. (It is after-all a modern concept). And, in the Christian Churches today, one is not expected to teach religion. US Catholic and Protestant communities have a consensus: church education is teaching with an end in view. The

32. NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, Washington DC, USCC, 1973.

end is to produce practicing church members. However, teaching religion does not aim to produce church members, but indirectly it may be necessary for intelligent religious affiliation in a (post) modern world.

Protestant church education in the US operates under the term Christian education. No one has had greater influence on the nature of the enterprise than Horace Bushnell. Bushnell, the honored Father of Protestant education, published his classic work *Christian Nurture* in the 1840's³³. It remains influential to this day. Bushnell wrote mainly about the family. His agenda was to offer an alternative to revivalism with its focus on conversion. He stressed the goodness and positive capacities of the child in contrast to the fallenness and depravity emphasized by the revivalists. Bushnell's work had and has a constructive and liberating effect on the church and especially the family. However, his metaphor of nurture became too much of a good thing. The Protestant Sunday school became the "nursery of the church"³⁴. Other educational agencies also came under its captivating spell. By lumping all educational activity under the word nurture, Bushnell obscures the distinctive role of the schoolteacher. To this day teachers in Protestant church schools are described as people who nurture children in the faith. When teaching is absorbed by nurture, the teaching of religion (as an academic activity) is excluded. Academic speech is mute and critical inquiry suppressed. This, in large part, is descriptive of Protestant elementary and secondary school classroom instruction. Christian education needs a healthy tension with a complimentary form and family of languages, namely, the academic. This can only come about if it resists the imposition of the nurturing metaphor on all form of teaching.

Catholic church education in the US operates under the term catechesis. Its educational activity revolves around the word and its cognates (catechetics, catechize, catechism). Catechetical language has its roots in the New Testament and the early Church. However, as an internal pattern of language, it is largely a post Vatican II phenomenon in Roman Catholicism. Catechesis is understood as formation in the faith. Its constitutive interest is to awaken, nourish, and develop one's religious identity, to build up the ecclesial body, to hand on the tradition. Its process is one of induction, socialization and maturation in the faith. In any survey of official church documents in the US and beyond, the catechetical

enterprise is defined as the total process of formation in the Catholic communal body³⁵. It is unabashedly confessional. The communal text is accepted. The educational act is to proclaim and instruct. This is education with an end in view: "to form the faith". The family of teaching languages is predominately homiletic. These assumptions are carried over into Catholic schooling in the US in all its work and mission. Catechesis is the Catholic equivalent of Christian nurture / education.

The scope of catechetical activity also has been significantly expanded in contemporary church literature. The US *National Catechetical Directory* says that the tasks of the catechist are "to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer, and to motivate them to serve others"³⁶. Message, community, worship and service are the four aspects of the work. This, I believe, is over extending the catechetical aspect of the Catholic Church. Etymologically and historically, such a meaning is not well supported. All four aspects are part of the Catholic Church's internal language of religious education. Only the first of the four tasks – proclaiming Christ's message – is clearly the work of the catechist. While the four aspects are clearly related, catechesis is rooted in "echoing the word". Announcing the Gospel, to be followed by an exploration of Christian doctrine, historically has been the core of its activity. It is understood to be one of the Church's educational ministries. Expansion of the term places an excessive burden on catechists, obstructs cooperation between ministries and collapses distinctions critical to the educational work of the church. This can be clearly seen when catechesis enters the Catholic school system, particularly the classroom of the parochial school.

In current catechetical literature, religious instruction in the classroom is understood as a form of catechesis. It is conceptualized as church ministry, has an evangelizing and conversionary intent, and is directed toward formation in the Catholic community of faith³⁷. The confessional character of catechism in Catholic school is not disguised. Nor does it need to be. However, classroom instructors in religion have to examine what motivates their teaching. What have the students consented to?

35. Some representative examples include *To Teach as Jesus Did* (n. 32); *Sharing the Light of Faith. National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, Washington DC, USCC, 1980; *General Directory for Catechesis*, Washington DC, USCC, 1998.

36. *Sharing the Light of Faith*, # 213.

37. See for example *To Teach as Jesus Did*, # 101-111; *General Directory for Catechesis*, # 73-75 and *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, Washington DC, USCC, 1988, # 66-96.

33. H. BUSHNELL, *Christian Nurture*, New Haven CT, Yale University, 1967.

34. See J.L. SEYMOUR, *From Sunday School to Church School*, Washington DC, University Press of America, 1982.

What languages are appropriate? What assumptions are operating? What processes prevail? Teachers of religion in a Catholic school have to maintain the integrity of their own work. If religion is a part of the school curriculum, there is an academic standard to be met. Academic instruction should not be burdened with the role of catechizing. The child who walks into the classroom of a church related school has the right to expect not catechizing but intellectually demanding accounts of religion. School teachers work in the context of classrooms and an academic curriculum. Catechists work in the context of sacramental life. School teachers teach religion; catechists teach the Gospel and Christian doctrine. Schools, whether public or religiously affiliated, attend to symbols, practices and documents. The catechetical venture is firmly within the framework of forming people to lead a Christian life. Catechetical language is important to preserve. It is an intimate, caressing language that nurtures Catholic life and identity. However, we need an educational language to complement the catechetical. That language transcends the Catholic Church. This academic family of languages is what should hold center stage in Catholic school classrooms.

Graham Rossiter insightfully observes, "there often remains some uncertainty about what teachers in schools are trying to achieve in their religion classes. Too strong a focus on the potential influence of Catholic schooling can obscure the focus on what should happen in a religion class"³⁸. The vast scope of its (catechetical) aims, he notes, can cover over and neglect the (academic) teaching of religion. This comes into clear relief when we scrutinize the assumptions in official Catholic documents. The standard phrase in Vatican and US diocesan guidelines is "to present clearly what the church teaches", or "what the magisterium teaches". Clearly that is the what the catechist (or preacher) is supposed to do. But is it the school teacher's task to present that to students? The answer is yes, if the material is relevant to the class topic of the day. But if one wants to teach religion that is a preliminary step in school teaching. As Moran noted, "The schoolteacher's questions are: What does the teaching mean? Where did it come from? What are its limitations? How is it changing? And dozens of similar questions ... A schoolteacher's vocation is not to tell people what the truth is or tell them how to act". "The schoolteacher's modest task", he writes, "is to explore the meaning of what is written from the past and to help students articulate their own

38. G. ROSSITER, *The Gap Between Aims and Practice in Religious Education in Catholic Schools*, in *The Living Light* 18 (1981) 158-166, p. 158.

convictious"³⁹. The truth or falsity of the church's teaching is not a direct concern of the teacher or student. This tends to upset Catholic Church officials. Their concerns are "orthodoxy" and "heresy". These concerns, however, are on a different wave-length. Both words are irrelevant in the classroom. The teacher of religion teaches the subject matter. He or she teaches the student to think. He or she aids in the understanding of texts. What the student does with this understanding (affirm or dissent) is up to the individual student.

The first aim, then, in teaching religion is to make the material intelligible – or at least to show how it is not unintelligible. The object to be understood is religion, including one's own religion. Some degree of otherness, some basis of comparison is necessary to understand. The other, as Emmanuel Levinas, informs us reveals us to ourselves⁴⁰. The second task in teaching religion is to make the religious text accessible to the students with "disciplined inter-subjectivity"⁴¹. The text is a mediator between the community of the past and a community of the present. The school teacher's job is to see that the text has a chance to fulfill that role. The discipline of the teacher is key. It must be done with fairness and fullness. Thirdly, the teaching of religion must attend to classroom design. The atmosphere and shape of the setting teaches⁴². While the attitudes of today's students cannot be the curriculum content, neither can these sensibilities and dispositions be ignored. As soon as students step into the classroom space, they enter a zone of freedom. The space ought to be an "ideal speech"⁴³ situation conducive to a hermeneutic-communicative competence. This teaching-learning design is indispensable if students are to discover the link between (religious) understanding and external (religious) practice⁴⁴.

39. G. MORAN, *Of a Kind and to a Degree. A Roman Catholic Respective*, in M. MAYR (ed.), *Does the Church Really Want Religious Education?*, Birmingham AL, Religious Education Press, 1988, p. 30.

40. See T.A. VELING, *Emmanuel Levinas and the Revelation of the Other*, in *Eremos* 61 (1997) Nov., 23-25.

41. P. PHENIX, *Religion in Public Education* (n. 30), p. 67.

42. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 59-79.

43. See J. HABERMAS, *Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 1: *Reason and Rationalization in Society*, Boston MA, Beacon, 1984. See also H. LOMBAERTS, *Religion, Society, and the Teaching of Religion in Schools*, in M. WARREN (ed.), *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, Vol. 2., Winona MN, St. Mary's Press, 1997, 306-329, esp. pp. 321-326 for some characteristics of the teaching of religion in the school environment in light of changes in the European continent.

44. G. MORAN, *Showing How* (n. 5), pp. 59-79.

The question may be asked: Would there be a difference in a course on religion in a public school and in a church affiliated school? The question can be answered on two levels: the level of principle and the level of practice. On the level of principle, the teaching act remains constant irrespective of the mission of the school. In the church related school, there will probably be more contextual meaning available because students, it might be assumed, are already practicing a way that embodies some religious meaning. This leaves room for a difference in emphasis but there should be no contradiction between what is taught in the two schools.

On the level of practice, however, the question of context can get very complex. Some Catholic schools in the US today have a student body that is less than 50% Catholic. Many have faculties that are predominately non-Catholic. Some Catholic students also may be in a state of rebellion against their religious formation and resistant to religion. In various geographical regions in the US, some public schools have a large Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish or Catholic student body. In each case, the material can differ but what is done with the curriculum should not essentially differ whether the school is related to the church or not. A course on the sacraments could be taught in a public school. While sacred Jewish texts might be taught in a Catholic school. Indeed, Gabriel Moran writes, "A good test of whether religion is being taught to Catholic students is whether the class is appropriate for non-Catholic students. If the school has to exempt the non-Catholic student from religion class, that would be an admission that what is going on in those classes is something other than the instruction proper to a classroom"⁴⁵. There may be political and institutional difficulties, but the direction is clear: to teach religion in public or church related schools is an academic vocation. Its teaching languages are dialectical discussion and academic criticism.

Throughout this essay, I have held in abeyance the proposal to reconceptualize religious education as practical theology. As you might guess, I am resistant to the proposal. The face of religious education explored here is part of a larger and wider *educational* venture. Practical theology may find a place *within* the other aspect of religious education, namely, to teach people to be religious. Christian theology, of course, can be a rich source of study. However, when theological content is taken into the classroom of the school it becomes the teaching of religion. The

45. G. MORAN, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (n. 8), p. 158.

texts are not assumed to be believed. The process is not "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm). Rather the theological content becomes subject to the same investigation, critique, interpretation, comparison, rejection or acceptance as any curriculum content. The teacher of religion is not an evangelized for the church. He or she is an advocate for richer words and meaning. The aim is to understand one's own religious tradition in relation to other people. Religious pluralism has been the condition that has led to teaching religion, but teaching religion in the US public and church related schools is the condition for sustaining religious pluralism in the Third Millennium.