

Postmodern Religious Educational Philosophy An Oxymoron?

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These are the fundamental questions: Is a religious educational philosophy relevant or even viable in the postmodern world? Or is a postmodern religious educational philosophy an oxymoron? An incongruous contradiction of terms?

The Postmodern Era

Our postmodern era is characterized by *globalization* in business and politics, in fashion and entertainment, and in economics. The abrupt devaluation of the Thai baht, for example, hurled the Indonesian rupiah into freefall and precipitated the end of the Suharto era. On another front, the collapse of the Russian ruble plunged the Brazilian real into a nosedive and prompted the Federal Reserve to abruptly adjust U. S. interest rates. Suddenly we are jolted to the realization that we now live in a global village.

Information dominance also characterizes the postmodern world. Driven by an exploding technology, the information age has arrived in force—media networks, satellite communications, electronic data banks, online journals, virtual chat rooms, search engines, fiber optic e-mail traveling at the speed of light, ubiquitous URLs, and the vast World Wide Web.

A third postmodern trait is *decentralization*. This tendency is seen in the balkanization of nations, the formation of states within states, and the creation of autonomous regions. It is also evidenced in a proliferation of grassroots movements, local initiatives, and bottom-up change. Top-heavy, centralized institutions are dying and are being replaced by lean, mean business machines that have spun off their own subsidiaries, thereby gaining energy, focus, and efficiency.

The postmodern era is also typified by a renewed *concern for ethics and values formation*. From business leaders, educational strategists, and heads of state, there has been an increasingly urgent call for the transmission of values and the formation of ethical behavioral patterns. Tragic events, such as the shootings at the Columbine School in Colorado, snuffing out the lives of 14 students and a teacher, have wrenched our hearts and painfully aroused us to the fact that it is simply insufficient to teach the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) plus a smattering of glamour subjects. Rather, it is imperative that we develop the moral consciousness of our students and instill a socially desirable value system to guide personal behavior.

In our postmodern world, there is an *awakening to metaphysical, transcendental dimensions*. Walk into a bookstore, peruse the TV guide, stand at the checkout counter in any supermarket, and it becomes obvious that the postmodern era is reaching out toward the mystical, the psychic, the supernatural. The New Age movement, with its pantheistic worldview, has subliminally shaped self-help programs, children's literature, music, and the arts. Crystals channeling cosmic energy are sold in the malls, while blockbuster movies explore witchcraft, spirit guides, the occult, out-of-the-body phenomena, and near-death experiences. Angels, myriads of them, line the figurine stands, emerge as the heroes of contemporary miracles, and materialize in best-seller lists. All are evidences of a spiritual awakening.

Finally, although not exhaustively, the postmodern era is characterized by a *fascination with futuristics*. Astrophysicists, meteorologists, microbiologists, political strategists, and social scientists are intensely engaged in efforts to predict and, if possible, control the future. Through complex computer models, simulations, genetic engineering, biogenetics, think tanks, and symposia, the search continues—to develop alternative forms of energy, to halt the depletion of the ozone layer, to discover the magic bullet for cancer, the key cocktail for AIDS, to overcome the physiological problems of weightlessness in prolonged space travel, to selectively introduce and reproduce desirable genetic traits in future generations of crops, livestock, and even humans. Altogether, a concerted effort to bring about a better and brighter tomorrow.

Historical Perspectives

Historically, religion has served as a guiding force for education. This was the case in the early Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, and later in the Persian and Jewish cultures, where the priests also served as scholars and instructors. In the Middle Ages, learning was archived and transmitted from century to century through the monastic system, while philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas sought to harmonize faith and reason, profoundly influencing educational systems. With the advent of the Protestant reformation, individuals such as Comenius, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Horace Mann set the foundations for modern education based on educational philosophies tightly rooted in religious convictions.

Response to the Conundrum

As we now find ourselves deeply immersed in the postmodern era, the question becomes particularly pertinent: Can religion effectively guide educational philosophy in our postmodern world?

Right up front, I will answer the question affirmatively and maintain that a religious educational philosophy is not only viable but also relevant and necessary for our contemporary society. In good postmodern fashion, I will seek to establish this position illustratively by presenting hallmarks of contemporary education with which a religious foundation is either congruent or in which it serves as a stimulus for quality and a catalyst for action.

As a case in point, I will utilize the Adventist philosophy of education. Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy is derived largely from the Holy Scriptures and from the writings of Ellen White, an early Adventist leader who wrote prolifically on the subject of Christian education. Her writings include numerous articles and half a dozen books that address the field of education, of which the book *Education* (1903 [ref. Ed]) is probably the best known.

Themes of Postmodern Education

The hallmarks of postmodern education that we will examine are:

1. High-level thinking,
2. Research involvement,
3. Cooperative learning,
4. Service experiences,
5. Differentiation of instruction, and
6. Character education.

While there are surely other defining characteristics of postmodern education, I have chosen these hallmarks because they are dominant themes in current educational literature and exemplify significant trends in postmodern educational practice.

High-level Thinking

According to the Biblical account, God created Adam, the first human being, and then presented him with his first cognitive learning activity—the task to name each of the animals (Gen. 2:19, 20). It would, perhaps, seem more efficient for God to simply inform Adam of the divine name for each species—“Adam, this is a hippopotamus. And this is a giraffe. Now, Adam, don’t forget!” But God apparently values creative thinking over rote memorization. And so Adam provides original, descriptive names for all members of the animal kingdom as they pass, two by two.

Adam, however, begins to do some analytical thinking. He puts two and two together, and he says, “God, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but something seems to be missing here. Where is the other one of me?” And God smiles and says, “Well done, Adam! You’ve passed your comprehensives. Now you can get married!”

The importance of creative and critical thinking is inherent in Scripture. To note just two passages: “Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matt. 13:52, NIV). Note that that “new treasures” imply creative, synthetic thinking. Critical thinking processes are also emphasized: “Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord” (Isa. 1:18, NIV).

Based on these Scriptural foundations, Adventist educational philosophy highlights the importance of high-level cognition and maintains that it is the work of true education “to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought” (Ed 17).

This Christian theme of high-level thinking, particularly the role of critical and creative thought processes, has emerged as a hallmark of postmodern education. Impelled by brain research (Levy, 1983; Sylwester, 1995), leading theorists have proposed the concept of teaching for intelligence. Bloom’s (1956, 1995) Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, Feuerstein’s (1985) Instrumental Enrichment, and Sternberg’s (1990) Triarchic Theory of Intelligence are prominent examples of these perspectives.

Other educators (e.g., Caine & Caine, 1994; Jensen, 1998; Udall & Daniels, 1991) have taken these theories and developed thinking skills programs. These include popular approaches such as Talents Unlimited (Schlichter, Hobbs, & Crump, 1986), De Bono’s (1991) CoRT program, and Sidney Parnes’ (1987) Creative Problem Solving model. In the Parnes model, for example, students become engaged in a six-step process—mess finding, data finding, problem finding, idea finding, solution finding, and acceptance finding—thereby sharpening their creative and analytical skills.

As we look closely at the area of high-level thinking, it seems that not only is a Christian educational philosophy congruent with the postmodern view of cognition, but that a religious philosophical base could, in fact, serve as a catalyst for instructional programs which focus on creative and critical thinking.

Research Involvement

Another significant trend in postmodern education is the involvement of students in research activities. The fundamental concept is that learners at any level must be producers and not mere parasites of knowledge. While this has commonly been seen as an inherent trait of graduate education, only in the postmodern era has it become a top priority of collegiate, secondary, and even primary education.

The impetus has come in part from the business sector, which typically commits a significant portion of the annual budget to Research and Development (R&D), as well as from the political sphere, where public leaders see research as the key to helping their nation soar to the cutting edge of science and technology.

The conduit for embedding research activities in the educational program has been constructed effectively by a number of educators, whose programs have been widely adopted. These include the Group Investigation model developed in Israel by the Sharans (1992); Bruner's (1985) Basic Structure of a Discipline approach, in which students walk through the thought systems and methodology of a particular subject area in much the same way as would a professional; and Inquiry Training, pioneered by Schwab (1982) and Suchman (1981), in which students are presented with sets of puzzling problems that they attempt to solve by building and testing hypotheses, and by collecting and verifying data. In each of these programs, there is a tight integration of research and learning activities that involves students directly in the discovery of knowledge.

Is this research development compatible with a religious educational philosophy? While recognizing the inherent limitations of empirical research, a Christian educational philosophy views research as a divine mandate to explore and examine God's truth, wherever it may be found. Scripture enjoins, "Test everything. Hold on to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). And, even more specifically, Solomon notes, "I committed myself to investigate and examine by wisdom all that is done under heaven. This difficult assignment has been given by God to the sons of men" (Eccles. 1:13).

Predicated upon Scriptural passages such as these, Adventist educational philosophy accepts research as a vital activity for all learners, an essential component of the learning experience. "Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation" (Ed 17).

Cooperation in Learning

Cooperation is another key premise in an Adventist educational philosophy. "Cooperation should be the spirit of the schoolroom, the law of its life" (Ed 285). This is in harmony with the writings of the Apostle Paul, who admonishes, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak" (Rom. 15:1). And again, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2, NIV)

The Bible, in fact, provides multiple examples of cooperative learning activities. To mention just two such situations: When Christ desired his disciples to put into practice what they had been taught, he sent them out in dyads—two by two—with the intent that they might experience the synergy that occurs when students work cooperatively together (Mark 6:7-13).

Another prime example of cooperative learning is found in the book of Daniel. Here we encounter a cluster of four scholars attending the Royal University of Babylon. Not only do these young men study together, but they also discuss issues together, pray together, and stand together. In fact, they conduct jointly a group investigation (1:11-16), one of the first recorded causal-comparative studies. Final results on the national examination demonstrated that this group of cooperative learners was ten times wiser than even the best scholars of the realm.

Positive results, although not perhaps of this magnitude, have also been documented in contemporary educational practice (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1999). In fact, cooperative learning is probably one of the best-researched current educational practices (Ellis & Fouts, 1997), and it has also become one of the most popular trends in postmodern education.

Perhaps stimulated by the effectiveness of teamwork in business and professional practice, by Alfie Kohn's (1992) seminal work *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* which has received wide circulation, or simply by multiple negative experiences of intense and often cruel competition, many educators have begun to question the role of academic rivalry and in its place emphasize the synergistic effects of cooperative learning. Given its solid research base, as well as fruitful links with Christian educational philosophy, it appears that this postmodern trend will continue to thrive well into the next millennium.

Service Experiences

While the modern era was aptly designated the technological age, the postmodern era is coalescing into the service age. And if modern man was characterized by narcissistic hedonism, the post-modern personage seems to be more service-oriented.

A 1996 Independent Sector/Gallup poll, for example, found that while 49% of the adult population had voluntarily engaged in service activities, 59.3% of teenagers (ages 12-17) had volunteered for service programs over the same time period. Participation in community service projects, in fact, seems to be on the rise. Volunteering of high school seniors, for example, is up 12 percent over the last 10 years, from 62% in 1989 to 74.2% in 1998 (UCLA/Higher Education Research Institute Annual Freshmen Survey, 1999). In fact, teenagers in the United States alone volunteer 2.4 billion hours annually (Independent Sector/Gallup, 1996).

Has education become involved? Most certainly. Many nations and educational institutions are recognizing the value of meaningful service as an essential curricular component. In Mexico, for example, all university graduates must give a semester, or in the case of the medical professions, a year of social service. In the United States, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has designated Service Learning as a primary initiative.

Quite a number of colleges are now incorporating service-focused courses in the required curriculum, while others are dedicating up to an entire day each week for community service activities. Rutgers University, for example, has established the CASE (Citizenship and Service Education) program, which currently enrolls 2,500 students in some 60 courses in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and at eight of Rutgers' professional schools. In its first five years of operation (1989-94), CASE student volunteers rendered 90,000 hours of service, and in 1994-96 alone CASE students rendered more than 55,000 hours of service to communities across New Jersey.

The University of Minnesota has established a National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, while the University of Michigan has established the refereed *Journal of Community Service Learning*, which joins existing service-oriented professional journals such as *The Generator: Journal of Service-Learning and Service Leadership* and the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*. For their part, high schools and elementary school have become actively involved in National Youth Service Day, with more than 3 million students participating. Globally, the International Partnership for Service Learning operates community service programs in the Czech Republic, Ecuador, England, France, India, Israel, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States.

Is this postmodern service-oriented educational development well aligned with a Christian philosophical foundation? Clearly. Christ Himself told his disciples, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), and the Apostle Paul exhorted the Christian believers, "Through love, serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Based on such Scriptural concepts, Adventist educational philosophy notes that in life "the greatest joy and the highest education are [found] in service" (Ed 309). It also encourages students to "learn life's great lesson of unselfish service" (Ed 30) through their academic activities.

Differentiation of Instruction

A core ingredient of a Christian philosophy of education is the concept that while all students should have equal opportunity to learn, they may need to undertake that learning in different ways. Adventist education, for example, maintains that teachers should discern and take into account a student's background, interests, needs, and dreams. "By coming personally in touch with their homes and lives, he [the teacher] may strengthen the ties that bind him to his pupils and may learn how to deal more successfully with their different dispositions and temperaments" (Ed 284).

This concept is founded upon the example of Christ, the Master Teacher. "In all true teaching the personal element is essential. Christ in His teaching dealt with men individually" (Ed 231). In the Bible, this may be noted in the case of Simon vs. Simon, that is Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) contrasted with Simon Peter (Matt. 16:21-23). In the case of Simon the Pharisee, Christ used the "silk glove" approach, taking into account the condition and context of the learner. In the case of Simon Peter, however, Christ employed "shock therapy" in an attempt to help the learner grasp his precarious situation.

Such differentiation is, of course, a principle evident throughout Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.... To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:20-22). Similarly, the Apostle Jude enjoins, "Of some have compassion, making a difference; and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire" (Jude 22, 23).

In contemporary education, differentiation of instruction—recognizing the uniqueness of each student—has become a significant trend. Based upon Guilford's (1967) *Structure of the Intellect* and Howard Gardner's (1983, 1993) theory of Multiple Intelligences, many educators have come to recognize that intelligence is not a monolithic structure, that talents may manifest themselves in many forms, and that students should be encouraged to develop in accordance with their own personal profiles of strengths and needs (Armstrong, 1994; Tomlinson, 1999).

McCarthy's 4MAT system (1987), Gregorc's (1982) and the Dunn's (1995) delineation of learning styles, and Calvin Taylor's (1990) Multiple Talent Approach are examples of effective, differentiated programs. Increasingly, teachers recognize the fallacy of the "one size fits all" supposition, and, in harmony with a growing research base, are opting for a more flexible, personalized approach to the teaching/ learning experience.

Character Education

Transmission of values and character formation are core ingredients of a Christian educational philosophy. In the Old Testament, values constitute an important part of the religious experience: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of thee? But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). In the New Testament, God-centered values lie at the heart of the cognitive process: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honest, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report... think on these things" (Phil. 4:8). In essence, Christian values such as these become the bedrock of character formation, of receiving the "mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5).

Adventist educational philosophy takes these Scriptural injunctions seriously.

☞ *The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall* (Ed 57).

☞ *Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now* (Ed 225).

We have already noted that a salient characteristic of the postmodern era is a renewed concern for ethics and values formation. In the educational context, beginning with Krathwohl's (1964) Affective Taxonomy and Lawrence Kohlberg's (1966, 1999) Cognitive-developmental Approach to moral education, this concern has been translated into an array of initiatives that focus on moral, spiritual, and civic education.

At the beginning of this year, for example, *Educational Leadership*, one of the most widely circulated educational journals, devoted an entire issue to the area of spirituality and character education. A profusion of books have also been published recently in this area—*The Case for Character Education* (Brooks, 1997), *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (Cole, 1997), and *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Nord & Haynes, 1998), to note just a few.

This trend has taken on international dimensions. In Asia, for example, educational systems have long advocated instruction in spiritual belief and ethical values. In Indonesia, the “Pancasila” (Five Guiding Rules) is taught in every school, and includes the core concepts of belief in God, unity in diversity, democracy, nationalism, and justice for all people. National education goals of Malaysia and Singapore similarly delineate ethical aspects. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) maintains through its statement of philosophy that higher education should contribute to the “cultivation and inculcation of moral and spiritual foundations.”

Conclusion

And so we have come full circle. In response to the question “Is a religious educational philosophy viable and relevant in the postmodern world?”, we would affirm that a Christian educational philosophy is not only congruent but crucial for education in our postmodern era.

In this discussion, we have illustrated the premise through six prominent characteristics of postmodern education. But we could just as well have chosen other postmodern developments. These might include, among others:

- ☞ A holistic approach
- ☞ Constructivist classrooms
- ☞ Site-based management
- ☞ Transfer of learning
- ☞ Teacher modeling
- ☞ Total quality in education
- ☞ Mastery learning
- ☞ Multicultural literacy
- ☞ Futures education

In each case, the salient characteristics of the postmodern educational trend seem to be in harmony with an educational philosophy derived from a Christian worldview.

In synthesis, the dissonance and divergence between religious educational philosophy and educational practice evident throughout much of the modern era seem to be fading. In their place, a cooperative, complementary approach is emerging in which religion and education can interrelate and jointly provide our postmodern world with a brighter hope for the future.

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