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DAVID HEYWOOD

Christian Education as Enculturation

The life of the community and its place in Christian Education in the Work of John H. Westerhoff III¹

How are we to understand the role of the local church in Christian education? John H. Westerhoff III presents a way of both understanding and deliberately utilizing the life of the community in the nurture of its individual members. While this aspect of his work is of great value, however, Westerhoff fails to locate his description of the Christian community within a broader picture of contemporary pluralist culture.

John H. Westerhoff III is one of the most important and influential exponents, both as theorist and popularizer, of the faith community approach to Christian education. This is a model which draws on the various approaches to socialization to be found in the social sciences to define the role of the Christian community in Christian learning and growth.² Westerhoff is a radical critic of methods of Christian education based on conventional education theory and practice, which he refers to as the 'schooling-instructional paradigm', preferring what he calls a 'community of faith-enculturation paradigm', or more briefly, 'catechesis'. The main thrust of this approach is the attempt to restore the relationship between intentional educational activities and real life situations, which Westerhoff believes to be strained or broken by traditional Christian educational practice, based on the methods of the secular classroom. Every area of the church's life, from choir practice to committee meetings, have, or should have, an educational dimension. Catechesis is thus an aspect of every activity the church undertakes.³

The analysis of Westerhoff's contribution to Christian education is not easy. His presentation, in a large number of books and articles, is largely popular and descriptive rather than theoretical or systematic. At the theoretical level, the quality of his writing tends to become elusive. His orientation is practical and his appeals to theology or to social science tend to be limited to support for his particular educational prescription.⁴ The pathway from systematic body of theory to coherent educational practice is obscure. Add to this the fact that Westerhoff admits a tendency to deliberate exaggeration, and the difficulties of pinning down his meaning with any degree of precision become immense.

Basic to his whole approach is the standpoint of socialization, an approach in which the individual is treated primarily as the member of a community.

'The difference some have drawn between socialization and education in terms of process is inadequate. Perhaps the real difference is in an understanding of the learner. The language of education tends to perceive the learner as an individual who associates with others and forms institutions. The language of socialization tends to perceive the learner as a communal being whose identity and growth can only

be understood in terms of life in a community that shares a common memory, vision, authority, rituals and family-like life together'.⁵

As an example of the practical outworking of this understanding. 'A Christian character is the aggregate of qualities resulting from life in a Christian story-formed faith community'.⁶ There is a strong protest here against what is seen as the individualism of Western society. Westerhoff is opposing the contractual society typical of the modern Western understanding of the state and the various communities within it with the natural community, such as the family, in which individual self-understanding grows out of, is moulded by and dependent upon social relationships. The life of the individual in modern, pluralist society is moulded by a large number of diverse and competing influences. Westerhoff's model of catechesis opposes to this process the unitary, pervasive influence of a distinct and distinctive Christian community.

The Community of Faith

What is this ideal community like? First, it is small, small enough for everyone to feel that they belong. He places a great deal of emphasis on 'deliberate, systematic and sustained interpersonal relationships of acknowledged value'.⁷ The maximum size for such a community is about three hundred, large enough in British terms, but in the American context a considerable limitation. Second, there must be diversity. Not only must all three generations be represented, but there must be diversity of role, of ministry and, if possible, of ethnic identity. Finally, the community must have a clear identity, a unity of perceptions and values. Catechesis is, 'without apology, value-laden, a process which aims to initiate persons into a particular community, with its values, understandings and ways'.⁸

How does such an initiation take place? The function of the community in catechesis is to provide the indispensable context for Christian learning and growth. One of the most important concepts Westerhoff uses is the 'hidden curriculum'. This is a feature common to all organizations by which the dominant perceptions of the nature and functions of the organization, and in particular features of social relationships such as authority and sex roles, are embodied in the functioning of the organization and passed on implicitly to its members. The hidden curriculum is thus a set of learning experiences not openly acknowledged as such, and for that reason possibly more powerful than what is explicitly taught. Whatever are the actual beliefs of the community about such things as worship, mission, the place of children, what it means to be a Christian, these will be reflected in the patterns of interaction which make up the life of the community and will be communicated to its members far more effectively than is the explicit teaching from the pulpit or in the Bible class. Attempts to make the formal educational parts of the church's ministry more effective will therefore be misplaced and ineffective if they ignore the hidden curriculum of community life.⁹ The concern of the Christian educator, therefore, is not simply with the individual, but with the community as a whole. It is involved not only with explicit teaching from the pulpit and in the Bible class, but with the implicit features of the lifestyle of the Christian community. Its aim is to alter the life of the community in order to achieve a specifically Christian corporate life-style. The goal of Christian education is the formation of a local church community whose corporate life is a faithful response to Christian tradition.¹⁰

Such a strategy is a particular response to the universally recognized distinction between the total process of learning and the deliberately structured, accelerated formal learning generally known as education. Westerhoff's position is that it is the unstructured, implicit learning which is most significant and therefore the principal efforts of the religious educator should be directed toward the source of this learning, the community.

Without deliberate attention to the shared context of religious learning, educational efforts centring on the individual are likely to be not only unnecessarily manipulative, but also relatively ineffective. Above all, instructional methods emphasize intellectual content, whereas if it is to be genuine, Christian learning must penetrate to the deeper levels of attitude and behaviour. There are significant parallels between his critique of the 'school-instructional paradigm' and the progressive critique of traditional methods of education of John Dewey and others. Dewey argued that it was the methods by which people learn a subject, quite as much as the actual content and its structure which influences their resulting understanding, and it is this distinction between content and context which Westerhoff is taking up, although in a more extreme and thorough-going way than that advocated by Dewey. He calls catechesis the 'process content of the Christian faith', the attempt to establish conditions, create environments and experiences, for Christian learning to take place.¹¹

The Learning Process

Westerhoff describes the learning process as 'symbolic, interactive and dialectical'.¹² 'Interactive' refers to the interaction between members of the community. 'Symbolic' refers to the elements in the life of the community, especially ritual, and the meanings attached to them. These meanings must be internalized, by a 'dialectical' process. This is the dialectic between personal faith and its outward manifestation in religious practice, the shared life of the community. Personal faith Westerhoff compares with perception, the way we see things. 'Faith is not one factor in human life alongside others. It is a basic orientation of our total personality, the centredness out of which we live'.¹³ Faith as a characteristic of the inward person is to be distinguished from outward actions. Intellectually, faith is manifested inwardly as believing, outwardly as doctrine. Behaviourally, it is manifested inwardly as worship, outwardly as liturgy.¹⁴ The 'dialectic' is the way in which inward meaning and perception is learned through outward action. Through participation in the worship and identification with the doctrine of the community, the individual learns the inward aspects of belief and worship and this brings about a change in his perception or primary orientation.

'Faith', says Westerhoff, 'cannot be taught by any method of instruction'.¹⁵ The person engaged in liturgy is not learning by traditional teaching methods, but through experience of the behaviour of worship, which brings about a change in perception of God and primary orientation. Catechesis is described as a process of 'conversion and nurture'. 'Nurture' refers to the ongoing process of transmission of the elements of the life of the community, its 'understandings and ways', its symbols and shared values. Conversion means the personal, inward appropriation of these elements. It refers both to the initial commitment to Christianity and to the process by which the faith of the community becomes the 'owned faith' of the individual. Conversion, however, cannot be nurtured. There is a discontinuity at this point between the inward and outward aspects of Christian experience. The process by which the individual internalises or 'owns' the faith expressed in the church's corporate life is one which cannot be controlled or planned for in the educational framework. It is the point at which the person is open to the mystery of the transcendent.¹⁶

Individual and Community

What then is the place of the individual in Westerhoff's catechetical community? What is the understanding of the learner in this model of Christian education? Basically, he or she is a person on a pilgrimage of faith. Westerhoff describes three basic styles of faith. In his earlier work these were thought of as 'stages' through which the individual passed, but more recently he has changed to calling these 'styles' which characterize the individual's response within the community of faith. First, there is experienced faith, observation and identification with parents and other models, the

faith of early childhood. Next, affiliative faith, characterized by a high degree of dependence and identification with the community and a ready acceptance of its authority. Then there is illuminative-reflective or 'searching faith', characterized by independence from community norms and intellectual searching and questioning. Finally, mature or 'unitive-integrative' faith is seen as a combination of the second and third, involves both intellect and intuition, action and contemplation and an attitude of responsibility within the community.¹⁷ These styles of faith obviously relate closely to the characteristics of children, adolescents and adults and a person can be expected to move through them as a process of growth, but they are not necessarily limited to particular ages, nor does Westerhoff see them as irreversible or exclusive. A person may have a different style of faith in different areas of his life. Because Christian growth is seen as a personal pilgrimage, Westerhoff eschews what he sees as technical pedagogical techniques, which make no allowances for different learning styles. There are no teacher-pupil relationships, only personal involvement with fellow pilgrims.¹⁸

Westerhoff's main criticism of the 'school-instructional paradigm' is that it is capable only of teaching religion, the outward reality, and unable to uncover faith. Faith, as primary orientation to life, is learned by socialization. Only socialization is capable of bringing about a redirection of this primary orientation, and this is the task not of the educator but of the whole community. Criteria for effective catechesis apply not to the individual or to the structured teaching-learning relationship but to the life of the community, the whole community being corporately the teacher and individually the learners. These criteria are criteria of a faithfulness to the Christian tradition. This tradition is seen as a reforming tradition. It is not enough to nurture individuals into a corporate tradition. Catechesis must be directed toward the way in which the whole community draws on the tradition. Rather than stagnating, it must be capable of reform and renewal. The problem addressed by the requirement of 'faithfulness' is thus the problem of the balance between nurture, or formative education, and the critical stance capable of producing change and reform. Formative education takes the tradition as given, and seeks to nurture the individual in the way of life expressed by the tradition. Critical education stands over against the tradition, looking for criteria by which to criticize its adequacy or relevance and thus seeking reformation. One of the main questions to be asked of Westerhoff's description of the process of catechesis is whether it has the theoretical depth to address this tension.¹⁹

The Social Context of Learning

The comments which follow aim not so much at a criticism of Westerhoff's contribution as to stimulate further exploration of the role of the Christian community as an agent of socialization in today's pluralist society. They fall under two main headings. First the aspect of Christian education toward which Westerhoff particularly draws attention, the social context of learning. But second, a question which is always in the background and requires careful examination, the adequacy of this particular model of 'catechesis' as a response to pluralism, that is the place of the church within the wider 'socialization community' of modern society.

The importance of the 'hidden curriculum' of community life is one of Westerhoff's most powerful insights. It is by its actions that the church effectively proclaims or fails to proclaim the Christian message. One of the examples he is fond of giving is the exclusion of young children from communion in most denominations. This practice is a theological statement about the place of children in the church. At the stage at which belonging is the most fundamental aspect of faith, the child is being taught that he or she does not belong. To take another example, the claim to be the 'family of God' is effectively undermined by the formality of many of our relationships. Whether a congregation actually believes the words of its own liturgy will be demonstrated by whether the exchange of the 'peace' is a perfunctory handshake or a genuine greeting.

Whether the issue is evangelism or social concern, the absence of these items from the agenda of PCC or board of elders effectively undermines the appeal from the pulpit for individual involvement.

The recognition of the social context of learning places a significant question mark against traditional transmissive methods of Christian education. The effectiveness of the sermon is limited by its social context. The message from the pulpit may be drowned by the encounter with the community. On the other hand, it may be that the reality of faith demonstrated in lives of Christians illuminates the message and brings the conviction of its truth, but this will be the case only when there is a clear expectation that the hidden curriculum of community life will respond to and reflect the message which is proclaimed.

Not only do traditional transmissive methods treat Christian learning as an individual rather than a corporate process, they rest on the assumption that the link between information and attitudes is unproblematic. The formation of attitudes, however, as Westerhoff shows us, requires more than good teaching methods. Attitudes are formed in community. They are emotionally structured, value-laden responses to life formed in and through relationships, the sphere of emotions. Faith is not a matter of intellectual belief, but of attitude. It is an affair, not simply of the 'head' but of the 'heart', and the 'Christian mind' ought to be read as the 'Christian attitude', the Christian way of seeing things. Faith, maintains Westerhoff, cannot be taught, referring specifically to traditional, didactic methods. Perhaps, we may add, it can be 'caught'. It can be formed in relationships as the individual internalizes the genuine orientations of the community to which he or she belongs.

The Church in Society

Socialization, the effect of the community not only on individual learning but also on individual self-understanding, is a live and important issue, too long ignored. In the second group of comments, however, I want to attempt to examine the theoretical level underlying 'religious socialization'. Is Westerhoff's account of 'catechesis' adequate or realistic in the modern world?

The answer to this question will centre around the understanding of our modern 'pluralist' culture. Here, Westerhoff's stance is extremely significant. He is an opponent of pluralism and of the individualism which he thinks is bound up with it. To the contractual society of modern pluralist culture, with its competing loyalties, he opposes the ideal of the one pervasive, dominant loyalty to the church as a natural community.

Westerhoff's analysis of American society is to be found set out most explicitly in the essay, 'Religious Education for the Maypole Dancers', Chapter 4 of *Generation to Generation*. The main element is a stress on continuity and permanence. Despite appearances to the contrary, Westerhoff maintains that most people maintain their geographical, ethnic and religious roots, that they remain members of communities with a common heritage, a shared memory and a shared vision. The exceptions to this pattern are the 'maypole dancers'. These are the rootless, the ones who, because of geographical or social mobility, have become 'marginal' to any one particular ethnic or geographical community, whose experiences are unique and particular rather than shared and corporately understood. This analysis is based on the anthropological studies of Westerhoff's co-author, Gwen Kennedy Neville, and in particular her analysis of the annual gathering at Montreat, North Carolina, of the Presbyterians of the Carolina Piedmont. These, she maintains, form a self-contained ethnic and religious community whose corporate identity within the broader society is maintained by the rituals of the annual gathering. On the basis of this analysis, Westerhoff goes a step further. He identifies this kind of corporate belonging as an ideal pattern. The problem for the maypole dancers is identified as rootlessness. The answer is the provision or formation of roots, the creation of stable community, of self-conscious subculture.

A similar nostalgia appears in the article, 'The Church and the Family'.²⁰ Here, he

explicitly compares the natural community, the *Gemeinschaft*, with the *Gesellschaft* or voluntary association. In contrast to the formal, impersonal structures of the *Gesellschaft*, the *Gemeinschaft* is more like a family, intimate, personal, emotionally involving. The breakdown of stable family relationships in modern mobile society is, he believes, irreparable. The answer is the formation of natural community within the churches. The church or community of faith is to take over the role of the kinship unit.

The fundamental objection to this analysis is the legitimacy of applying the picture of socialization drawn from stable, self-contained, geographically bounded communities to the analysis of modern western pluralist society. Is the insistence on stability and continuity really credible? Modern society consists of a multitude of overlapping 'social worlds' created by and coterminous with channels of communication. In such a society, each person is the centre of a web of communication channels, the unique intersection of reference groups, the inhabitant of multiple social worlds, the family, work, ethnic community, sports clubs, neighbourhood and, perhaps, the church. The consequences for the pattern of socialization are enormous. The individual typically adjusts his behaviour to the reference group which is relevant at the time, whether work, family or leisure activity. A single, all-pervasive source of meanings and values is impossible to maintain. Even for the member of a distinct ethnic or religious group, therefore, this membership and the perceptions and values which go with it are one particular item in a fragmented experience. They must compete with secular culture, with the values of the state, the school and the TV. The *Gemeinschaft* type of community, even if it remains identifiable within the structure of society has lost its most fundamental characteristic, the boundary between itself and the alternative sources of values, and with it the capacity to call for total involvement and pervasive loyalty.

If the church is incapable of becoming a natural community on the family model, it nevertheless has a role to play as part of the broader 'socialization community' of which society is composed. The church is a 'reference group' along with the various other agencies of socialization: educational, political, therapeutic, and so on. There are two elements in the make-up of a reference group which must be distinguished, the people who belong to the particular group and the perspectives which they share. The church is created, sustained and reformed by its shared perspective, its tradition, which must be distinguished from any particular group of people seeking to embody or live faithfully to it. One of the failings of faith community theory is the lack of a clear distinction between people and perspectives, between the two senses in which being a Christian involves belonging to the church, on the one hand belonging to a community and on the other, sharing the perspective of Christian commitment.

In place of a 'church' model of religious socialization, then, what is required is a 'Kingdom' model, one which recognizes that the perceptions and values which make up Christian faith can and do exist separately from the people with whom they are shared. The Kingdom is not to be identified with the Church. It is not a sub-culture, but a leaven. It consists of a shared perspective, Christ as reference figure, distinct from the church, which is best understood not as a family, but as a peer group, the 'fellow pilgrims' of Westerhoff's analysis.

This analysis, finally, provides a framework in which to understand both the nurturing and reforming activity of the church, the tension between spiritual formation and critical education. It is through the community that the child or the convert is initially nurtured into the faith; the support of the community is essential for the support of the new self-understanding and the change in basic attitudes which is an essential part of genuine Christian conversion. Yet the tradition from which the community's shared values are derived has a life of its own, broader than its embodiment in a particular localized community. The internalization of the tradition in the process of continuous conversion, the 'owning' of the shared faith, makes the individual, perhaps paradoxically, less dependent on the church, better able to stand with the tradition over against the community. The prophet does not stand outside the community, but within it as an

interpreter of the shared tradition. Given a basis of common understandings, the tradition is free both to inform and to reform the community's life. Critical education is the means of reflecting on the tradition. Formation both requires and enables reformation.

References

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Jeff Astley of the North of England Institute for Christian Education for his help in the preparation of this article.

² Other examples of faith community theory are: C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins*, Atlanta, Georgia, John Knox Press, 1967 (Presbyterian); Berard L. Marthaler, *Catechetics in Context*, Huntington, Indiana, Our Sunday Visitor, 1973; and 'Socialization as a Model for Catechetics', in *Foundations of Religious Education*, ed. Padraic O'Hare, New York, Paulist Press, 1978; Wim Saris, *Towards a Living Church*, London, Collins, 1980; and *Living the Faith Together*, London, Collins, 1985 (Roman Catholic). For a brief introduction, see Charles R. Foster, 'The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education', in *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, eds. Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon, 1982.

³ *Inner Growth/Outer Change*, New York, Seabury, 1979, pp 57-60.

⁴ James Michael Lee, who has, in contrast to Westerhoff, produced a systematic theoretical approach to religious instruction, in three volumes, calls Westerhoff a 'tractarian', a writer of tracts. *The Content of Religious Instruction*, Birmingham, Alabama, Religious Education Press, 1985, pp 392, 704, 712.

⁵ *Building God's People in a Materialistic Society*, New York, Seabury, 1983, p 50.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p 90.

⁷ *A Faithful Church*, with O. C. Edwards Jnr, Wilton, Connecticut, Moorhouse, Barlow Co., 1981, p 3. 'A Catechetical Way of Doing Theology', in *Religious Education & Theology*, ed. Norma M. Thompson, Birmingham, Alabama, Religious Education Press, 1982, p 220.

⁸ *Generation to Generation*, with Gwen Kennedy Neville, 2nd ed., New York, Pilgrim Press, 1979, p 8. See also *Will our Children have Faith?*, pp 52-54; 'The Church and the Family', *Religious Education*, 78, 1983, pp 260-262.

⁹ *Will our Children have Faith?*, p 16f; *Generation to Generation*, p 38f.

¹⁰ *Inner Growth/Outer Change*, pp 3-16; *A Faithful Church*, pp 4-5; *Generation to Generation*, pp 41-49.

¹¹ *Will our Children have Faith?*, p 8.

¹² *A Faithful Church*, p 3.

¹³ 'A Catechetical Way of Doing Theology', p 220f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Will our Children have Faith?*, p 23.

¹⁶ *Inner Growth/Outer Change*, pp 20-23.

¹⁷ *Inner Growth/Outer Change*, pp 17-18. *Will our Children have Faith?*, pp 89-103. *Learning through Liturgy*, with Gwen Kennedy Neville, New York, Seabury, 1978, pp 162-164. The idea of 'stages' of faith does not involve, in Westerhoff's work, the structuralist theoretical basis found in the work of James Fowler, e.g., *Stages of Faith*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981.

¹⁸ It is not clear from Westerhoff's work as a whole whether he thinks that it is by their very nature that technical pedagogical techniques may make no allowances for individual differences or whether this is only a frequent, unintended result. Certainly, he is opposed to the 'instructional' paradigm which emphasizes the study of effective teaching methods based on the theories of social science. However, quite a number of his books include examples of specifically educational methods, e.g., *Inner Growth/Outer Change*, part 3. On the use of teaching methods, Gabriel Moran comments: 'Before the Church can claim to get beyond education — especially that of the school — it has to be sure it can get so far'. 'Where Now, What Next?', in P. O'Hare (ed.), *op. cit.*, p 78.

¹⁹ J. M. Lee points out that socialization and reformation or liberation are two entirely different things. A theory of Christian education which takes socialization as its basic theoretical model cannot simultaneously address the issue of liberation, as Westerhoff claims to do. *Content*, p 731.

²⁰ *Religious Education*, 78, 1983, pp 249-274.

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