

New Thinking in Catechetics

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by Dorothy Berridge, S.H.C.J.

The new approaches in religious education which are still a controversial issue in this country, certainly did not have to wait for Vatican II, even though the Council and its teaching has been one of the major factors at work. The pioneers of the movement, as of so many others in the contemporary scene, can be traced to the beginning of the present century, and to continental biblical scholars who were not content to let the fruits of their studies remain in academic isolation. Rather they quickly saw the need to communicate their new theological thinking to the youngest members of the Church, so that gradually the content of traditional syllabuses of religious instruction was transformed. At the same time began the introduction of more child-centred methods of presentation of the Christian message under the influence of contemporary educational changes in the teaching of secular subjects.

These two factors, content and methodology, are often confused, not only (and understandably) by parents and priests necessarily remote from the professional field of education, but also, and more regrettably, by the teachers themselves. It is these who are rapidly losing confidence in their own abilities to cope, and it is this predicament that brings them in such numbers to the wide range of courses being held up and down the country.

In so far as the main aim of such teachers is to find a ready-made syllabus, complete with well-tested answers to their particular problems, this is, I feel, regrettable. Good teaching of religion, as of any subject in the curriculum, is of necessity 'do-it-yourself'; only the teacher on the spot, knowing the children, their backgrounds, their particular abilities and interests, can effectively adapt the content of any syllabus to their needs. What the teachers do need, of course, is more expert tuition in the content, in the scriptural, doctrinal and liturgical basis of Christian belief and practice. This is what the courses should provide, and what teachers should demand as a priority at the present moment. For this they need time to attend lectures, to do the essential background reading, and above all, to discuss; to discuss with their lecturers, and with their fellow-teachers, the implications of what they are studying for the children they are to teach.

But in religious education, far more so than in secular subjects, one further field of knowledge is necessary; not only the content, and how this is to shape the presentation of the message, but also the

religious psychology of the child. Psychological insight can help to shape a more effective way of presenting mathematics or history, but there is more to this where religion is concerned. We are now beginning to appreciate the reality of natural religious needs, attitudes and concepts, even in very young children, which it is the responsibility of Christian teachers to respect, even to direct and purify; that is, to educate in the fullest sense of the word.

Psychological studies of children's religious thinking that are adequate and acceptable to both the psychologist and the theologian are unfortunately few and far between. One recent French publication that meets both criteria deserves mention, namely *Structure Génétique de L'Idée de Dieu*, by the Abbé J. R. Deconchy, and published by the Lumen Vitae Press, Brussels (1967).

This prize-winning contribution to the first Quinquennial Competition for studies in religious psychology makes a definite contribution to a neglected field. A first account of the author's research findings has already appeared (in an admittedly poor translation) in the June 1964 edition of *Lumen Vitae*, under whose auspices the Prize Award has been set up. The first report gave a clear account of the methodology used in this investigation into the development of ideas of God, i.e. that of a semantic approach. Children of school age were asked to give written responses to six stimulus words, Home, Father, Mother, God, Priest, and Sin. The author admits the limits of this approach, especially the possible 'contamination' of the 'God-centred' replies, with which he was particularly concerned, by those of the preceding parental associations; but what does emerge, interestingly enough, is the developing ability of children to differentiate these very associations, even at the youngest age group.

The 1964 analysis was confined to the development of the answers of Boys aged seven to sixteen years; in the more recent account Girls' replies are included, giving some valuable examples of the differences at each age. The seven-year-olds of both sexes have been excluded in the sifting of the sample to give a representative cross-section of the population tested, namely all children in full-time Catholic education in the diocese of Lille. (The reason for the low returns from seven-year-old girls was due, as appeared on enquiry, to the removal of the poorest written attempts in an effort by their nun-teachers 'not to give a bad impression of the school'! This is a not untypical finding by research workers in this particular field.)

Of the original 8,000 or more tested, the final analysis covers the replies of 4,660 children of both sexes, and is thorough and detailed. The charts and diagrams concerned will delight the addict, if he can interpret the French terminology into its English equivalent, a task that frequently defeated the original translator of the *Lumen Vitae* article. But the findings of the first analysis of Boys' replies, which fell into three stages or 'emphases', are paralleled in the subsequent

analysis of the Girls'. The ages of transition differ especially at *stage two*. Here one suspects that the Girls' answers are perhaps being forced by the author into the original classification he devised for the Boys' data. He states that at all stages, the Girls are developmentally in advance; a common enough finding in developmental studies on verbal lines. There is, however, no evidence of this at *stage one*, the eight to ten-year-olds, the stage when God is referred to predominantly by 'attributes' (Greatness, Omnipresence, Beauty, etc.). And at *stage two*, that of 'Personalization' of the concept of God (Sovereignty, Redeemer, Fatherhood, etc.), the evidence shows that the Girls make the transition a year *later*, i.e. Boys, eleven to thirteen, Girls eleven to fourteen years. This discrepancy he explains by saying that the Girls express their concept of God in predominantly personalist terms at all ages, but does not see that this may query his whole system of analysis. One can't help thinking that the findings might have been quite different if he had begun with the Girls' replies. Finally comes the *third stage* of 'internalization', with concepts of Obedience, Love, Doubt and Dereliction predominating for both sexes.

Overall, differences between the sexes are shown in twenty out of the twenty-seven themes into which the answers were analysed, as well as the two further categories of Unclassifiable or Blanks, which are more typical of the Girls' entries. These are also more marked for themes of Lordship, Prayer, Doubt-Dereliction and Eschatology; the Boys, in contrast, produce more replies connected with Obedience, Heaven and Our Lady. The more detailed analysis gives more specific differences, which are confirmed by many of the existing studies of religious development.

At *stage one* (eight to ten years), God is seen predominantly as the creator, almost as an artisan, and standing apart from his creation. There are frequent references from the Boys to the Passion of Christ, often of a sadistic and morbid nature, with the resurrection as the triumphant miracle. Prayer is predominantly at a liturgical or formal level, rather than spontaneous and personal, and usually is seen as coming *from God to man*, rather than the opposite. The marked parallelism found between the responses to the child's own parents and those to God is partly a result of the proximity of the stimulus words on the answer sheet; but the difference at each age are as revealing as the similarities. As psycho-analytical studies would predict, the Girls' concept of God is closer to that of Father, whereas for the Boys it is closer to that of Mother. But in each case, where the parent is rated as good, intelligent or kind, God is distinguished by being *very good*, *very intelligent* or even perfect.

For the child at *stage two* (11 to 13/14 years) it is the concept of God as creator which still predominates, but now he is seen more as the creative principle; God is not merely intelligent but brilliant. The father parallel predominates for both sexes, with more evidence

of the transcendental nature of God, though this is confused by the obvious historicity of the person of Christ. If the parents are seen as good, then God is Goodness. The greater awareness of the sexual role of their parents shows itself a source of shock in many replies, especially for the Boys, for whom it invokes ideas of sin and guilt. There are fewer sexual responses from the Girls, and these are more associated with love, God taking on the procreative role of the human father. Another peculiarly masculine feature at this age is the wealth of biblical replies, usually centred on Moses and the Exodus, but this is largely seen as a mythological sequence, together with the idols and totems of pagan cultures. While this may be attributed to the more scriptural formation the men teachers receive than the nuns do, the author deprecates the obvious Hollywood techniques that seem to have been used, in which salvation history is presented as a super-Western.

Finally, the all-important adolescent stage, which still figures in the literature as an age of crisis and doubt. Evidence of this appears in the present study, side by side with examples of a more poetic and lyrical strain, especially for the Boys. This gives us insight into an under-rated feature of religious experience, even if it may take on a defensive role of withdrawal from the realities of life. This is also seen in the young person's concept of God as the sympathetic friend to whom he can turn for understanding and support, especially marked with those who have unfavourable responses to parental and home categories. Intellectual replies, often centred on the Trinity, also are typical of Boys at this stage, but together with those of a more poetic strain, are less evident in the Girls' replies. The Girls in contrast have a much more synthesized concept of the person of Christ, who is seen as both the historic figure and the redeemer; for the boys, these two aspects are more separate and differentiated.

But the main interest at this stage is provided by the author's highly original if somewhat technical analysis of the development for each sex of the key themes or *axes* that emerge, *Confidence-Dialogue* on the one hand, and *Fear-Aggression* on the other. For both sexes, these two themes are mutually independent, but their contributory factors are not necessarily identical and interact in completely different ways. The relationship for the Boys in each case is linear, i.e. with one common factor, and for the Girls triangular, i.e. all factors interconnected. For example, the Confidence theme for the Boys leads on to Fatherhood and through this into Goodness; whereas for the Girls, Confidence is linked with Christ as Saviour, and both of these with Goodness. Fear, for the Boys, is associated with Lordship, and this in turn with Strength; but for the Girls, Fear is associated with Fatherhood, and each of these with Justice. The two independent *axes* along which these factors are distributed do, however, meet in a further, common factor, Justice for the Boys and submission for the Girls.

To elaborate any further would be taxing the comprehension of the reader too far, whereas my hope has been to persuade him to consult the book at first hand. While admittedly highly technical, the author's interpretation does underline the different routes taken by the religious concepts of Girls from those of Boys, and their need for a separate approach when their problems are being handled.

At the same time, the author raises the query as to how far these results are the product of environment, and how far inherent in our differential sexual make-up. It would be interesting to repeat the study over here, and the present writer would be only too willing to act as co-ordinator for any surveys on these lines. (It might even give her a helpful reply to those well-deserving students whose letters begin: 'I am undertaking a study of children's religious development, and wonder if you could advise me. . . .')

As well as the sociological differences between French and English Catholicism, there is the factor of single-sex versus mixed schools. All the French sample seem to fall in the first category; over here, we would assess this more clearly, as more of our secondary schools are becoming co-educational. How far are Girls' religious concepts affected by being taught by men, and Boys by women, for example?

The results of this French survey, empirical and statistical to an nth degree, confirm many of the existing studies tackled from a variety of approaches. They also give support for many of the more subjective and theoretical contributions to this field, and in so doing underscore the message that is emerging as clearly from all directions, namely, the very real limits of a child's ability to respond to formal religious instruction, and the equally real need for more research on these lines if we are ever going to communicate effectively the message of salvation to the younger members of the people of God.