Alternating Currents: Sacramental and Prophetic Imagining and Church Education

Kieran Scott

There are no automatic lifelong members of our churches today. While this may have been true to some degree in the past, today it is mostly self-evident. This raises the urgent need for a vibrant and comprehensive church education. Horace Bushnell, in the early-nineteenth century, opposed a once-and-for-all lifetime conversion. “The child”, he proposed, “is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise” (Bushnell, 1979, 4). Bushnell advocated “Christian nurture” as a (developmental) lifelong model of education. It remains the dominant metaphor for education in Protestant congregations. Formation is the corresponding metaphor guiding education in Roman Catholic parishes. Both metaphors are incapable of carrying the richest meaning and diversity of forms and processes of education critically needed in Church education today.

This paper engages the current conversation on the problematic nature of Church education. Edward Farley writes, “the churches hide from themselves the uncomfortable fact that they promote an education that does not educate” (Farley, 1990, 131). They are entrapped, he claims, between ordered learning (academic) and popular piety (religiosity). Church education, he observes, stands within this tragic gap and dualism, operating within a never-never land with little distinctive character. This paper takes up Farley’s analysis as a point of entry into the nature and challenge of contemporary education in our churches. While not fully in accord with Farley’s analysis, the paper frames a constructive alternative response in terms of the dual role of the imagination in congregation/parish life. Paul Tillich, in his well-known essay, “The End of the Protestant Era?” (1948), framed it in terms of the Church combining a “Catholic substance” with a “Protestant principle” – although Tillich did not restrict the substance to the Catholic side nor the principle to the Protestant side. This essay proposes a sacramental and prophetic imagining, held in creative tension, as the life-giving dynamic needed at the center of teaching-learning in our churches.

Alfred North Whitehead (1967, 17) writes: lack of attention to the rhythm of growth and development is the main source of wooden futility in education. This paper offers a rhythm of alternating currents, the sacramental and prophetic, celebration and lament, as an educational back and forth process urgently required to transcend “The Tragic Dilemma of Church Education” (Farley, 1990:131-145) today.

The paper proceeds to paint a portrait of sacramental and prophetic imagining as a unity of conflicting forces in the life of the congregation/parish. A trinity of teaching-learning applications will be drawn out from each alternating side.

Sacramental Imagining

The imagination plays a fundamental role in the cultivation of our vision of the world. Its power opens us to new possibilities, other ways of seeing. It enables us to “look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Maxine Green). Stanley Hauerwas proposes that the central aim of the
Christian life is training in a “truthful vision of the world” (Hauerwas, 1981, 31). The church, he argues, ought to be a training school to help us see for the whole course of our lives. It ought to help us see the world through the gaze of the divine – in contrast to the wider patterns of cultural perception. We can only act within the world we can see (Hauerwas, 30-47).

From a Christian perspective, there are two divergent ways of seeing and naming reality, namely, sacramental and prophetic ways. These two forms of Christian imagination are grounded and united in their commitment to seeing what is ultimately real. They disclose what is beautiful and broken, graced and sinful, in our world. As these two imaginative religious forms tend to go in opposite directions, the task of Church education is to hold them together in a productive tension. What is needed is a paradoxical form of education, namely, a movement toward a unity of conflicting forces at the center of the life of our churches.

The sacramental imagination renews our vision by teaching our eyes to see again. It offers a counter vision to the distorted perception of reality perpetuated by our technologically obsessed and all-consuming cultural practices. It is a distinctive way of seeing the world. It points to the presence of the divine in all things. Matthew Eggemeier writes, “The sacramental imagination views creation as a manifestation of the glory of God... [It] is grounded in a distinctive relationship between God and creation – while God is transcendent to creation, God is also found in the imminence of creation” (Eggemeier, 8). This paradox is sustained by the analogy of being: God is both other than being and simultaneously present in all being. It affirms the omnipresence of God’s grace in the world.

For Michael Himes, this is synonymous with an experience of the sacramentality of creation. Himes writes, “By sacrament I mean any person, place, thing, or event, any sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell that causes us to notice the love which supports all that exists, that undergirds your being and mine and the being of everything about us. How many such sacraments are there? The number is virtually infinite” (Himes, 99). The world and everything in it are seen as actual or potential carriers of the sacred. This is profound recognition that our relation to God is always mediated by bodily action. We do not need mediating objects or “middleman” between the divine and the human. God can be perceived by our bodily sense of sound, smell, taste, touch. The sacred is mediated through matter –through our bodily experience of the ordinary events and things of this world. We encounter “Mystery through manners” (Flannery O’Connor). For the Christian, the most profound incarnation of the sacramental presence of God is Jesus, the sacrament of God.

Christians, Soren Kierkegaard declared, are “joyful heirs of the finite”. Nothing is profane for those who know how to see. A sacramental imagination offer intimations of eternity, signals of transcendence. It is an enchanted, mythical imagination (Brelsford, 2007:264-278). The miraculous is always present in the quotidian, even if elusively. “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). This sacramental religious form attempts to regard nothing in the world as alien or hostile to humanity (Teilhard de Chardin). Its perception is rooted in the goodness of creation. Our work is to transform what is already good into what is holy. What needs doing is re-creation. Sacramental religious practice is “the hallowing of the everyday” (Buber). “The world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manly Hopkins). All is gift. All is grace. The sacramental imagination’s response to this gift of creation is a disposition of gratitude, praise, awe and wonder. A sustained schooling and training in this sacramental way of seeing reality can enable us to direct what is already good toward the Holy.
The educational implications of this sacramental perspective and principle are profound and pervasive. I will note three with direct relation to congregation/parish religious education, namely, revelation, teaching and spirituality.

**Revelation**

A sacramental imagination seeks “God the Lord in all things” (Ignatius of Loyola). All aspects of created being can mediate grace. Anthony Godzieba writes, “It is clear that the key to understanding sacramentality is mediation. The crucial claim is that material ‘stuff’ has the potential to be a channel of grace, that creation necessarily mediates the presence of God that enables our participation in divine life, on God’s initiative” (Godzieba, 16). Through the eyes of faith, sacramental imagining “recognizes that the finite can indeed mediate the infinite – that materiality and history together are the means by which God has chosen to reveal God’s self” (Godzieba, 16). This perspective raises the question and meaning of revelation. Revelation is the fundamental religious question of our time. The word seeks to capture the divine-human relation. The meaning of revelation can either be a barrier or a bridge between religions, and between religion and science today. In modern times it has been the source of deep conflict. A sacramental vision, on the other hand, with its deepest and richest meaning of revelation could be the path to cooperation, compassion and care with the religious other and non-religious world.

When we make revelation a thing, an object, a set of “revealed” truths beyond human experience but revealed by God or propositional statements of beliefs, creeds, doctrines, it becomes a wedge. When revelation is understood as exclusively in possession of and under one group’s control, it is a recipe for division and violence. When some part of creation, a book (The Bible), a place (Jerusalem), a person (Jesus), a group (church), is understood to contain revelation, we have reified it into something…frequently handed down from the past. When we use the term “Christian revelation”, we are creating insuperable obstacles when speaking to people who are not Christian. Gabriel Moran writes, “There is no thing named ‘Christian revelation’ that Christians possess. There is only one process of revelation within which Christians, Jews, and Muslims are called to respond today” (Moran, 1997a, 159).

“All revelation,” Martin Buber writes, “Is summons and sending” (1958, 115). God calls, the human responds. Revelation is a metaphor for God’s activity to which humans respond. The term points to what is universal but always has particular concrete expressions. With an inclusive meaning of revelation, “every place, every book, and every person can be revelatory, although none is guaranteed to be so… [yet] there is no homogenizing of the revelation, for some things, some events” (Moran, 1997a, 161). Although some writings, some persons, some historical events and some practices, hold more revelatory power than others, nothing can be excluded from being Word of God. This directly correlates with a sacramental vision of reality: revelation is the religious dimension of human experience in which all people participate. It is a process of personal relations in which the divine is revealed. God still speaks in our most intense experiences: I – Thou (Buber). The Word of God is always spoken in the present. The one revelation is still available to those who have ears to hear. “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord” (Ps. 34, 8). All human bodily senses and all actions of a person are included in divine-human relation.

This sacramental understanding of revelation runs deep within our Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions. All our sacred texts, beliefs, rituals can be re-understood in light of this
perspective. What structures a religion is people’s participation in revelatory experiences. Only if we can hear God’s voice today within our respective traditions can religion be a vital response to re-creating the present. Otherwise, it will be a dead weight on our shoulders.

Teaching

For those who know how to see – really see – nothing on earth is profane (Teilhard de Chardin 1960,36). All of human work is capable of being sacrament. This is the sacramental lens Maria Harris brings to the act of teaching in her work, Teaching and Religious Imagination (1987). Our discourse on teaching, Harris claims, is unworthy of us. We think too narrowly, too instrumentally of teaching. We reduce the act to a set of techniques, methods, procedures and exercises. These do have some role in the overall vision of teaching. However, her assumption is: the way we speak about teaching influences what we do when we teach. Harris imagines teaching as a vocation, a calling to re-create persons and their relation to the planet. She writes, “I am convinced our society desperately needs a philosophy of teaching that explores the dimension of depth in teaching, a philosophy that begins not with technique but with the majesty and mystery involved in teaching” (24).

Harris invites us to see teaching as an activity of the religious imagination. Specifically, she sees the act through the lens of the sacramental imagination. When viewed in this manner, “teaching itself becomes a sacrament, a symbolic, ritual form through which the holy is mediated” (22). It is analogous to any work of creation. In specific religious language, she proposes her thesis: Teaching is the incarnation of subject matter in ways that lead to the revelation of subject matter. This embodiment, giving-flesh to subject matter, involves the creation of (a repertoire of) forms. The form is the shape of the content. The process is revelatory. At the heart of this revelation, Harris postulates, is the discovery that human beings are the primary subjects of all teaching. We discover that we are handed back to ourselves with the power and grace to recreate ourselves and the world in which we live.

Teaching is showing someone how to do something, and learning is responding to being shown how (Moran, 1997b). Teaching-learning, Moran proposes, can be viewed as a revelatory process of call and response (Moran, 2009: 151-172). This interpretation gives rise to a starting principle for education in our churches: a revealing God teaches through everyone and everything. Every creature participates in the process of teaching-learning. The church teaching and the church taught becomes obsolete. A dialogical relation in its structure and educational practices emerges throughout the life of the congregation. Education is life-long and life-wide. The foundational life of the community (and its plurality of educational forms) will be the chief educator. While some may have an official designation as teacher or catechist, the teacher is literally everyone and everything. The educational mission of the church should also include a distinct setting and aim that is academic in nature. This schooling process ought to be a sacred space where the church’s history and practices can be critically and creatively explored. Our congregations/parishes are in urgent need for this thoroughly sacramental teaching-learning in every form and facet of its life.

Spirituality

There has been a resurgence of interest in spirituality in our time. The term has acquired an all–inclusive meaning that can float into generalities, abstractions and escapism. That is why
spirituality needs the grounding and wise restraints that religion can offer. A sacramental vision and a sacramental spirituality can offer the needed corrective and nurture. The poetic prayerfulness of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the nature mysticism of Annie Dillard or the Hymn of the Universe by the Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, are exemplary expressions of a sacramental way of seeing. Our Christian traditions house a plurality and rich set of spiritual practices. I note in particular here Celtic spirituality.

Celtic spirituality is part of an ancient stream of contemplative spirituality stretching back to the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, St. John the Evangelist in the New Testament, and to the life of the early church in the British Isles. Philip Newell notes, “The feature of Celtic spirituality that is probably most widely recognized, both within and outside the Church, is its creation emphasis…This spirituality lent itself to listening for God at the heart of life” (Newell, 203). The spiritual is seen coming through the physical. God is seen as the Life within all life, the life force in the depths of all creation. We are invited and called to listen within all things for the life and heartbeat of God, and to respond.

Celtic spirituality affirms 1. the essential goodness of creation, 2. good and bad, grace and sin, intermingle in life, and 3. the immediacy of God’s presence in the world. The material realm of creation is shot through with spirit. Even though creation bears the finger prints of God, the world and its inhabitants are held down by forces of darkness. Salvation means liberation from these evil forces so that our essential goodness is set free. There is a sense of God’s immediate presence. No ladder is needed to connect heaven and earth. Heaven is in the midst of earth and earth is crammed with heaven. “So to look to God,” Philip Newell notes, “is not to look away from life but to look into it”(Newell, 48). God and creation are inseparably intertwined in the flow of life – in work and play, in rest and repair of the world. God is “above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians). God is the Being on whom all being rests, the Light within all light, the Good from which all goodness flows. The world is a theater of God’s glory. This sacramental creation-centered spirituality is an invaluable resource for congregation/parish life. It holds the possibility of revitalizing our liturgical practices, catechetical instruction and our service to the suffering people of the world, including our suffering planet.

Sacramental imagining is the life blood of the Christian churches and its set of practices. It gives vitality to our religious lives. It holds before the community the contents of the tradition. Edward Farley’s analysis here is correct. He sees in it (under the canopy of personal piety) the danger of idolatry. It can slip into sentimentalism, emotionalism, superstition – where religion and its belief system can become an idol. It is precisely for this reason that an alternating current of education is needed in our Christian Churches. For this complementary opposite, we turn to prophetic imagining.

**Prophetic Imagining**

Sacramental and prophetic imagining is grounded and united in a commitment to seeing the real (Eggemeier, 13). However, they diverge in how and what they see, and the way they name reality. In sacramental seeing, grace is in abundance. In the prophetic, sin runs amuck. In the former, the world is a beautiful garden. In the latter, it is overrun with weeds. The sacramental is enchanting. The prophetic is catastrophic.
Prophetic imagining emerges out of a different experience of the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “The painter sees the world in color, the sculptor in form; the musician perceives the world in sound, and the economist in commodities. The prophet is a man who sees the world with the eyes of God, and in the sight of God even things of beauty or acts of ritual are an abomination when associated with injustice” (Heschel, 1969, 211-212). Justice is placed center stage. It is no mere norm or abstract idea. In prophetic imagining, justice is perceived as a mighty stream, a never-ending surging movement, a relentless drive. What ought to be shall be. God is a God of justice.

Prophets are misconceived as marginal people functioning at the outer bounds of society. Rather, they are at its center, deeply in tune with its cries and painful whispers. They rage and grieve, feeling the anguish of their people. History is their preoccupation. What does the present moment demand? In their sensitivity to “reading the signs of the times”, they become “a watchman” (Hos. 9; 8), “an assayer and tester” of people’s ways”(Jer. 6:27), a mouth piece of God (Hag. 1:13). The eyes are directed to the contemporary scene, and from their reading, they are moved by responsibility for society. They: 1. call into question and resist society’s current boundaries, 2. stretch the boundaries to new limits, and 3. seek to restore the covenant.

Matthew Eggemeier notes, “The starting point of prophetic discourse is not, therefore, the contemplation of the splendor of the beauty of creation. Instead, it is rooted in the encounter with the burning flesh and tortured bodies of victims of oppression. From the perspective of the prophetic imagination the world is described as a catastrophe... a disaster... or a crucified people.”(Eggemeier, 10). History is a nightmare. The basic problem, Heschel argues, is that our cultural perception is dominated by “conventional seeing”. Walter Brueggemann names this “the dominant royal consciousness” of our time (Bruggemann, 2001). From a prophetic exegesis, this offers a false, illusionary and idolatrous view of reality. This distorted vision takes the established as real, as taken for granted, with a sense of certitude. Heschel writes, “our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience” (1969,5). This dominant culture is characterized by indifference. But Heschel asserts “All prophesy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned. He is personally concerned what man does to man. He is a God of pathos ...The prophet’s great contribution to humanity was the discovery of the evil of indifference” (Heschel, 1972, 92-93).

Prophetic imagining offers rupture to the dominant mode of seeing. It brings a disruptive word. It contests the way of existence imagined by conventional, normative culture. If offers prophetic witness against spiritual smugness, political and social heartlessness, and our economic addiction to profit. It scuttles our illusions of false security, challenges our evasions and exploitations of the poor. In a word, it sees its task as dismantling all idols in its service to the correct ordering of things. Prophetic imagining does not end in negativity. Its moment of critique opens avenues to genuine perception, seeing anew. Its interruption of the taken for granted view of things is rooted in the conviction that genuine change only begins by recognition that there are alternatives to, what Brueggemann calls, “Empire”. Prophetic imagining can be described, then, as an exegesis of society from a divine perspective.

The educational implications of this prophetic perspective and “Protestant principle” are likewise profound and persuasive. I will note three with direct relation to congregation/parish
relational education, namely, the academic and Christian traditions, consuming religion/spirituality, and the suffering of the innocent.

The Academic and Christian Traditions

Edward Farley acknowledges the indispensable need for popular religiosity and piety (what I name sacramental imagining) in the life of our church. “Church education’s primary aim is clear”, he writes, “that aim must be to transmit, promote and support the popular piety of actual religion” (Farley, 133). The “tragic dilemma of Church education,” however, for Farley, is that popular piety (sacramental imagining) has been split and severed from modern intellectual convictions and processes in our local churches. There has been a recurring history of tension and struggle between the academic and popular religiosity in our Christian traditions. However, Farley believes, this tension has mostly collapsed at the local ecclesial level. This lends itself to the formation of idolatrous images, beliefs and claims. Religious emotionalism and superstition runs wild, functioning with a pre-modern cosmology. Farley’s critique is on target here. Prophetic education is an invaluable resource needed as a corrective to this flattened out traditionalism and dogmatism. It can be a gift and grace to church education.

Critically reflective academic processes will not be the major form of education in our churches. Communal nurture and formation will be the prevailing forms for passing on the traditions. But when prophetic critique is absent, preaching becomes vacuous, catechesis wooden and ritual practices empty of meaning. Gabriel Daly writes, “Some Christians see their faith as the dogged, and sometimes hearty, affirmation of apparent self-evident truths. They have no time for doubt or hesitation, or indeed for the sort of question which would probe their beliefs…[they]are so taken up with their dogmas that they simply forget that those are no more than halting efforts to say the unsayable. To think that even the most sacred of our doctrines can do more would be like thinking that one can capture the universe in a butterfly net” (Daly,1982,76-77). Prophetic imagining (and its set of educational practices) is needed when we sense the old consensus is breaking down. It is urgent when the old truths have become inert, boring, weary, irrelevant, “the dead faith of the living” (Pelikan, 1984, 65). It brings a hermeneutic of suspicion to the symbols, codes and practices of the tradition: ecclesia semper reformanda. It is a purifying process. It resists the absoluizing instinct. No thing is God: no viewpoint, no code, no belief, no rite, no polity, no church. The prophetic educational task here is to prevent the creation of new idols. The prophetic protest, however, is for the emergence of new forms of ecclesial life. It challenges every old truth for the sake of a new and richer truth which is breaking in upon us. This can lead to the revitalization of our religious traditions “a living faith of the dead”(Pelikan,65) and create life-giving forms of social graces in our world. Giving our traditions a living expression, generation to generation, is one of the chief responsibilities of church religious educators today.

Consuming Religion/Spirituality

Abraham Heschel asserts, “The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome… the prophet knows that religion could distort what the Lord demanded” (Heschel, 1969, 10-11). The Hebrew prophets exposed the scandalous pretensions of religion, its false aura of institutional sanctity, its degeneration into illusion and mystification. Micah, the prophet, lashes out against religious hypocrisy and selling out:
“Her leaders render judgement for a bribe
Her priests give decisions for a salary,
Her prophets divine for money,
While they rely on the Lord, saying
‘Is not the Lord in the midst of us?
No evil can come upon us!’
Therefore, because of you,
Zion shall be plowed like a field (Micah 3:11-12).

Micah saw and condemned the early commercialization of religion. Some contemporary writers have continued this analysis. The all-pervasive commodification in contemporary culture has led to the commodification of religion. Bourgeois religion, Johann Metz claims, has been reduced to the realm of individual piety – with little to do with political, economic, and social life. Religious rituals, symbols and beliefs have been abstracted from their original communal setting and re-used to serve the needs of consumer culture. Vincent Miller adds to this line of critique. Religious traditions, he writes, “are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is repackaged and recontextualized in ways that jettison their communal, ethical, and political consequences” (Miller, 2004, 84. See also Hinton, 2011). In doing so, Miller claims, consumer culture trains parishioners to function as consumers in their religious activities.

Gregory Jones offers a similar scathing critique of some forms of contemporary spirituality. “I am convinced,” Jones writes, “that much of contemporary spirituality is shaped by consumer impulses and captive to a therapeutic culture … [it] separates spirituality both from theological convictions and practices on the one hand, and social and political realities and commitments on the other” (Jones, 1997,4). Too often, Jones observes, popular spirituality is prone to tailor the spiritual journey to the individual’s privatized needs and desires. The focus is almost exclusively on the self-sufficiency of one’s interior life. It becomes a new commodity to consume. Social and economic political realities and commitment are not addressed. And it has severed itself from centuries of Christian practice. “Thus the disruptive character of Christianity”, Matthew Eggemeier writes, “is silenced and Christian spirituality is repackaged as a soothing therapeutic exercise that serves the needs of a culture committed above all else to the enjoyment of consumer activity” (Eggemeier,xiv).

Prophetic imagining is urgently needed to save religion from itself. Its way of seeing can release religion from its captivity to the logic of the market and re-direct it to the practice of authentic freedom. In this context, Christian spiritual practices teach resistance, to become detached, from those features of our world that separate us from God and free us to cling to the One who alone can satisfy our desires.

The Suffering of the Innocent
“Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

What is upper most in the prophet’s mind is the presence of oppression and corruption. The urgency for justice was an urgency of aiding and saving the victims of oppression. The prophet speaks on behalf of the other – the neighbor – especially the poor, the oppressed and the marginal other. The prophet is intent on intensifying our responsibility to the suffering of the innocent of the world.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, Matthew Eggemeier writes is “the foundational biblical narrative …that sees a suffering world and responds to it with compassion and mercy” (129-130). It is a prophetic parable, he notes, in three movements: 1. The encounter with the embodied suffering of the other that makes an ethical demand on the subject, 2. A response to the suffering of the other that moves the subject to relinquish self-interest before the face of the other(kenosis) and, 3. The subject is called to respond with compassion and mercy. Eggemeier notes,” The priest and the Levite who pass by the wounded victim regard ‘it’ as a mere ‘thing’ and soon forget they ever saw ‘it’. By contrast, it is the Samaritan who possesses the eyes to see the wounded victim as a person because the Samaritan looked at the sufferer with attention” (147). Prophetic vision is pedagogy of (real) presence. It is a “mysticism of open eyes” (Metz). “It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and – convenient or not - pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it” (Eggemeier, 124).

The choice facing our Christian churches today is: Will we see through the eyes of the priest and Levite or through the eyes of the Samaritan? Will we take comfort in forgetfulness (amnesia) or recall the dangerous memory of Jesus, the Christ (an-amnesia)? With the globalization of poverty, the mass of humanity teeming across borders in search of a dignified life, the structural and obscene inequality of the market place, and the current ecological desecration of our common home (Pope Francis, 2015), prophetic witness and interruption will be a characteristic mark of authentic Christianity today. Johann Metz asserts, “The issue today is that we should learn to ‘live differently’, so that others should be able to live at all…it is precisely this change of viewpoint, this kind of interruption, this refusal to allow things to keep on as before – in short this act of resistance toward ourselves and our way of life till now – that is at stake today” (Metz, 1981, 95). Our churches need to offer the marginalized and innocent suffering more than crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table. Prophetic education in our churches ought to direct the innocent suffering to a place at the table. This is precisely the parabolic religious developmental element church education needs today.

The thesis of this paper is that education in our churches needs to live in a productive tension and rhythm of the alternating currents of sacramental (analogical) imagining and prophetic (dialectical) imagining. They cannot simply move on parallel tracks. Each is indispensable to the other. The sacramental without the prophetic falls into sentimentality. The prophetic without the sacramental slips exclusively into negativity. They are two conflicting poles of the religious imagination that need to move toward a unity/synthesis in the life of the congregation/parish. Dermot Lane writes, “What is important about the religious imagination is the dynamic capacity of the human spirit to hold together affirmations and negations in a new
unity of transcendent meaning. In this way the religious imagination is able to perceive the
infinite within the finite, the eternal within the temporal, and the divine within the human.
Within this activity there is a movement by the spirit from the particular to the universal, from
the concrete to the ultimate, from the relative to the absolute, from the part to the whole. The
religious imagination dares to picture the ‘unpicturable’, to represent the unrepresentable, and to
know the unknowable” (Lane, 2003, 20). It is this dare and risk that is at the heart of education
in our Christian churches today.

References


Brelsford,T. 2007. A Mythical Realistic Orientation for Religious Education: Theological and
Pedagogical implication for the mythical nature of religious story. *Religious Education*
102 (3), 264-278.


Farley,E. 1990. The Tragic Dilemma of Church Education. In *Caring for the Commonweal: 
Educations for Religious and Public Life*, eds. Parker Palmer, Barbara Wheeler and


Virtues: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, 30-47. Notre Dame, IN: University of
Note Dame.


Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*,


