Catholic Schools as Spaces for Transformative Encounter

Abstract
The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created a curriculum for Catholic secondary schools that describes what adolescents should learn including the importance of developing a Catholic identity, encounters through service, and a deeper understanding of interreligious dialogue. This study adds the how to the bishops’ what by exploring Augusto Blasi’s theory of the moral self (1983) as it relates to Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory (1982, 1994) to enable religious educators to create a transformative curriculum of encounter in Catholic Secondary schools that helps adolescents develop a religious and moral identity amid the complexities of contemporary society.

Introduction
Pope Francis calls on Christians to embrace a culture of encounter by working together to build up the common good by nurturing shared values in a pluralistic world. In his Evangelii Gaudium he states how it is important to “build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity” (2010 n. 228). In 2016, he created a Youtube video where he described the urgency of engaging in interreligious dialogue and prayerfully requested “that sincere dialogue among men and women of different faiths may produce the fruits of peace and justice” (The Pope Video 2016). It is by embracing the other through encounters in dialogue that we can begin to see others in their deepest dignity.

Increased religious diversity calls religious educators to rethink how we approach education in secondary schools. The United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework (Framework) Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis also focuses on the importance of recognizing diversity and communion and fostering interreligious dialogue. They created a curriculum “Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues,” often referred to Catholic high schools as a world religions course. The Bishops’ goals for this curriculum include “help[ing] students understand the manner in which the Catholic Church relates to non-Catholic Christians as well as to other religions of the world” (49). The Bishops’ acknowledge the importance of dialogue with other faith traditions by helping students understand the various forms of interreligious dialogue; such as, “the dialogue of daily life in religiously pluralistic societies/communities” and “the dialogue of shared service to the needy” (53).

This study embraces the prophetic call to enable young people to engage in transformative encounters with others and experience deep communion. Research shows that by creating spaces where adolescents encounter people unlike themselves through meaningful dialogue and engaging activities where they are taught how to work together, for example, through service or an intentional classroom experience, they can deepen their own religious and moral identity and develop a habit of mind committed to the common good, or shared moral responsibility (Burbules & Rice, 1991; Parks, 2000; Patel, 2007). Sharon Parks states the
dynamics of a “constructive encounter with otherness” shows the human “capacity to take the perspective of another and to be compelled thereby to recompose one’s own perspective, one’s own faith (2000, 140). The ability to take another person’s perspective requires a developmental shift in how we make meaning. This study explores how constructive-developmental theory can enable religious educators to help young people experience deep communion by creating spaces of encounter in Catholic secondary classrooms.

**Background**

**Religious Diversity and Pluralism**

Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, maintains that young people want to belong, they want to feel a part of something larger than themselves, but it takes someone to recognize them for their potential and their abilities, to show them they belong. Organizations and schools are important places to nurture the moral, spiritual, academic, and psychological formation of young people; however, as Patel states, “it’s not a place young people need so much a role, an opportunity to be powerful, a chance to shape their world.” (Patel 2007, 16).

Young people, especially those who feel marginalized in society, are extremely vulnerable to organizations who see cultural and religious diversity as a threat to their way of life. As Patel notes, organizations with religious totalitarian ideologies are quite successful in putting their resources into recruiting and initiating young people to their ways of life. Religious extremist organizations, he argues “prey on young people’s desire to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact. We see their successes in the headlines of our newspapers every day” (Patel 2007, xvii). People in the United States saw an example of this on August 12, 2017 when a young man, affiliated with the white supremacist protest formed by a group called “Unite the Right,” drove his car into a group of counter protestors killing one young woman and injuring over a dozen others. The driver of the vehicle was only 20 years old, just two years out of high school. As a religious educator, I pause to reflect on what could have been done to help this young man grow towards acceptance and understanding instead of intolerance and hatred. Religious educators are called to respond to all forms of intolerance, hatred, fear, and bigotry to minimize the effects of tribalism, misunderstanding, and false narratives in our society.

Religious and cultural diversity has dramatically shifted the landscape of the United States in the last 30-40 years. The findings from Robert Wuthnow’s research with the National Religion and Diversity Survey describe how fifty years ago the majority of immigrants to the United States were Christians from Western Europe (2005, 2). From 1965-1999, 22 million people immigrated to the United States from religious traditions other than Christianity. These “new immigrants” include Muslims, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and other non-western religious traditions (2-4). A recent report by Public Religion Research Institute states, “white Christians, once the dominant religious group in the U.S., now account for fewer than half of all adults living in the country” (Cox and Jones 2017).

Americans often view the response to diversity as something of a challenge. Wuthnow observes rather than engaging actively with religious pluralism, many people in the United States choose tolerance or “coexistence rather than pluralism” (2005, 74). Diana Eck, director of The Pluralism Project at Harvard, explores the effect of religious diversity and pluralism in the United States. She notes that the increasing religious diversity in the United States is causing leaders to rethink how they understand and respond to religious pluralism. While religious diversity points to the fact that there are many religious traditions in the United States, Eck states, “diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is not a given but must be created” (2001, 70).
Eck describes three characteristics of religious pluralism. First, she argues it is not synonymous with diversity, rather, “religious diversity is an observable fact of American life today…[and] pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest difference” (2001, 70). Second, pluralism is something that needs to be fashioned and refashioned with every generation and goes “beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other” (Eck 2001, 70). Finally, Eck notes that pluralism does not give rise to an anything goes mentality, that it “is premised not on a reductive relativism but on the significance of an engagement with real differences” through dialogue (71).

Anatanand Rambachan, religion scholar and advisor to the Pluralism Project, sets the difference between diversity and pluralism in the context of spirituality and our efforts to understand the transcendent. He states, “the movement from mere religious diversity to religious pluralism is inspired by the understanding that God is not an object or a commodity to be possessed exclusively or controlled by any single tradition and that God or the absolute exceeds all human efforts to define and describe” (Rambachan 2000, 174).

There is a growing concern among some religious educators and leaders in the institutional church that the growing cultural and religious diversity in the United States is leading young people to lose a sense of Catholic identity and moral commitment, or worse, to become religiously and morally “illiterate.” These concerns shaped the drafting of the USCCB’s Curriculum Framework (Schroeder 2015). Their goal was to ensure that religious educators teach the doctrines of the Catholic faith with fidelity by providing them with the content, or the “what,” including the “what” of encounter. For example, The Framework indicates the content for a course on “Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues” should include teaching young people the importance of interreligious dialogue and working with people from different faith traditions “in service to those in need” (USCCB 2008, 53). The Framework describes what adolescents should learn, namely the importance of encounter through service, and the need for them to understand interreligious dialogue based on common ecumenical religious practices. It does not supply the how. This study focuses on how religious educators can be attentive of the dynamics of creating a mature pluralism in Catholic secondary schools.

Dialogue and Encounter

Encounters through dialogue can provide meaningful ways for students to engage in critical thinking, grow in their understanding of their faith and religious practices, and nurture what Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice describe as “communicative virtues:” such as, tolerance, patience; [and] respect for difference” (Burbules and Rice 1991, 411). Being attune to the constructive and transformative characteristics of dialogue helps religious educators intentionally nurture transformative encounters.

Encounters come through experiences with someone or something larger than ourselves that changes how we come to know the world. A true encounter with someone unlike ourselves occurs when we bring our own narrative or understanding of reality into dialogue with another person’s understanding of reality through patience and understanding. Eoin Cassidy reflects on the meaning of a religious encounter from the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition. He writes, “…it is only in listening to another that one finds the key that will unlock the door to either one’s own heart or to the presence of God in one’s life…” (2006, 883). A conversation may provide us with new information, but if we are not attentive to discovering something new from someone else, it may leave one or more people unchanged. An encounter, on the other hand, has the potential to radically challenge our understanding of ourselves, others, and our relationship with the divine.
Dialogue in education is not a one-way discourse, commonly found in what Paulo Freire refers to as the “banking model,” or a simple “exchange of ideas” (Freire 1970, 77). He notes, dialogue is “the encounter between men[sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (76). For Freire, “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (81). Rambachan affirms Freire’s description of dialogue stating interreligious dialogue should never simply “inform us about others in a detached and abstract way” (2000, 179). A curriculum of encounters with the other can lead to a deep communion with the divine and with others. Critical thinking and dialogue then require us to consider and reflect our own perspectives as well as recognize and reflect on the perspectives of others.

Burble and Rice believe the best space for dialogical encounters are initiated and sustained through “educational contexts” because “they do espouse and frequently enact a commitment…to the value of communication across difference and the benefits of encountering new and challenging points of view” (407). The authors outline three reasons why they believe it is important for educators to actively engage students in dialogue across difference: it has the potential to nurture the “construction of identity along lines that are more flexible without becoming arbitrary;” it can expand “our understanding of others and, through this, our understanding of our selves:” and, finally, it can “foster more reasonable and sustainable communicative practices” (404).

This study takes seriously this call to create contexts for young people to encounter others in dialogue across difference before they reach young adulthood. Parks, Keen, Daloz, and Burble and Rice describe how higher education can provide one important space for encouraging encounters in dialogue. This study argues that by creating a Catholic secondary school classroom as a space for transformative encounter, religious educators can begin fostering habits of dialogue across difference in adolescence and early young adulthood.

How, then, can a Catholic secondary curriculum on “Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues” embrace the religious other? Gabriel Moran reminds us that “the material of religion lends itself to a more personal involvement. The teacher draws upon the meaning of the environment which includes the experience of students and teachers” or an ecology of learning forms (Moran 1982, 76). If we take Freire, Rambachan, Moran, that “education does not have as its aim the attainment of anything” (Moran 1982, 44 italics in original), then a curriculum on “Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues” should move beyond expecting students to know and understand more about the worlds religious traditions. It should be created in a way that is attune to the developmental needs of young people and encourages students to understand the perspectives of others unlike themselves through dialogue in classroom encounters.

**Methodology**

This paper presents a conceptual analysis of Augusto Blasi’s theory of the moral self (1983) as it relates to Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory (1982, 1994) to explore how religious educators can create a curriculum of encounter in Catholic Secondary schools.

Kegan maintains that a person’s “culture of embeddedness,” or those people and structures in a person’s immediate community, provides natural supports (or hindrances) for healthy human development (1982, 115). According to Kegan, the ways in which our culture and communities support adolescent development can directly affect the emphasis young people place on moral issues; such as, interreligious dialogue that is focused on promoting peace and justice. Hence, the development of a moral self (using Blasi’s language), as integral to one’s identity, is impacted by
a person’s culture of embeddedness (e.g., one’s school, home, and church) and how one is socialized and makes sense of life experiences. This study calls religious educators to be attuned to the constructive-developmental aspects of moral development and the dynamics of fashioning a religious and moral identity amid the complexities of contemporary society.

The context of one’s social environment plays an important role in the growth and development of human personhood (Kegan 1982, 1994). The dynamics of creating and developing meaning from our experiences with others help us understand more fully who we are and how we relate to others and our environment. How people perceive themselves in relation to their experiences evolves through psychological stages, or what Kegan calls levels of consciousness (Kegan 1982, 13). People evolve in the ways in which they organize their experiences, and over time become more mentally complex as they grow. Blasi’s theory of the moral self maintains that moral thought and behavior directly reflect personality or identity. Around the period of adolescence, Blasi states: “the true inner self” develops “not as a result of one’s effort and the object of one’s responsibility” but emerges as something that is a given part of how we are seen by others in our relationships with them (Blasi 1983, 105). Wuthnow affirms this stating, the way we construct and develop how we make meaning has a direct effect on how we perceive of others and our society and adds that “making sense of religious diversity is one of these meaning-making activities (2005, xii-xiv).

Blasi and Kegan describe how people undergo significant identity developments throughout adolescence (Blasi and Milton 1991, Kegan 1994). Explaining the period of adolescence, Kegan writes: “[it] amounts to that time in our lives when we move from being ‘brought up in the faith’ to becoming ourselves spiritual adherents to that faith” (1994, 267 italics in original). The way in which adolescents are nurtured in their faith development will have a direct effect on how they connect to their faith and to others. In this way, preparing and guiding young people towards meaningful encounters with others helps them develop their religious and moral identity, and Catholic schools could provide important space for this undertaking.

Adolescent Development

During the high school years, adolescents may be transitioning between the second and third levels of consciousness. In the second level of consciousness, we organize our knowing around our own needs, and self-interest. That is, we often make people and things objects of our own interests as a way to fulfill our own needs. At this level, we have the developmental capacity to recall a sequence of events, but struggle to formulate abstract concepts. They can articulate their own points of view and see that other people hold different points of view, but they struggle to hold two different views concurrently (Kegan 1994, 30). Kegan describes how a 12-year-old, for example, may be able to recall every detail of a movie, but they may not be able to articulate the overall thematic significance of a given movie (see Kegan, 1994, 33).

As we evolve towards the third level of consciousness we come to share the needs of others by developing interpersonal relationships. We feel good when others feel good; that is, our sense of self comes directly from our relationships with others. At this level of perception, we begin to rely on role models, and we start to understand our place in the larger society. This participation in “the common weal” often gives people direction and “a definite sense of their place, their time, and their song in the universe (104) and “lets us know how we matter” (268). We can begin to think abstractly, to empathize with others, and to coordinate more than one perspective at a time.
With this stage of moral reasoning, more commonly found as we transition from adolescence towards young adulthood, we focus more on living up to the expectations of society or authority. In desiring to live up to the expectations of those around us (like our parents, or teachers) we “relativize or subordinate [our] own immediate interests on behalf of the interests of a social relationship” (Kegan 2000, 54). This level of shared expectations, often referred to as an ability to follow “the golden rule,” shows that we are now able to understand how our moral actions affect others, and ourselves, while a person at the second level of consciousness is less likely to follow “the golden rule” because he/she has not yet developed the capacity to “reciprocally role-take,” or take the perspectives of others into account when she/he makes moral decisions (Kegan 1982. 55).

Blasi’s theory of the moral self (1983) explains how a person’s understanding of moral reasoning and moral judgment is dependent on a person’s self-definition and surrounding social context. In contrast to Kohlberg’s research, which only focused on moral reasoning, Augusto Blasi’s theory focused on one’s sense of morality identity as influenced by both moral action, and moral reasoning. For example, based on Blasi’s study, if asked about the morality of stealing, an adolescent may reason that the act of stealing was morally wrong (182). However, when the adolescent was actually in the situation, and heavily influenced by his/her peers, that young person may steal a can of soda from a convenience store. Blasi’s theory points out that that this adolescents’ moral reasoning and moral actions are not in accord with one another. Blasi suggests that if a person can build up a strong moral identity, then their moral reasoning and moral actions are more likely to be consistent (186).

Blasi describes four key aspects of a person’s experience of moral identity, based partly on Lovinger’s research on ego development: Social-Role Identity (most commonly found among adolescents), Identity Observed, Management of Identity, and Identity as Authenticity. In the middle and high school years, adolescents may be constructing and developing a sense of morality through the Social-Role Identity, similar to Kegan’s second level of consciousness. This level of morality helps adolescents follow rules when they believe it is fair or if it benefits them in some way. For example, Blasi and Milton, from their interviews with early and late adolescents, observe that when Paul, a sixth grader, “is presented with a concrete example of insincerity, he focuses on the consequences for other people: It is not nice to act friendly with a boy you dislike; "He should tell him, so that the person he doesn't like shouldn't come near him” (Blasi and Milton 1991, 234). Paul does not consider his actions in terms of what is right or wrong rather he evaluates how the consequences of an action relate to himself to determine if he should act a certain way.

Kegan’s third order of knowing shares features with Blasi’s Identity Observed mode, namely “the true inner self” develops “not as a result of one’s effort and the object of one’s responsibility” but emerges as something that is a given part of how we are seen by others in our relationships with them (Blasi 1993, 105). The transition from basing our moral self on personal or immediate rewards or consequences to focusing more on self-reflection and how our actions affect others can begin during late adolescence during one’s senior year of high school. When we transition out of the third level of consciousness and move toward the fourth level we seek a new balance based on differentiation, rather than inclusion. As we develop a new sense of identity our own voice and experiences become the authority by which we make decisions. At this stage in life, our own opinions and values are held as ultimate, more so than the feelings and opinions of others. With the development of our own internal authority, or identity, comes the capacity to act on our moral judgments, and evaluate our responsibility or obligations to those
judgments. In third level knowing, we take many of the moral values of those closest to us as our own values.

Societal Expectations

Kegan expands his discussion of growth toward maturity by considering the effect of culture and society on human development. He argues that there are specific sets of demands or levels of expectations that society places on persons at each stage of life that can spark growth and development (1994, 100). Societal expectations can include parents’ expectations for their adolescent children to be responsible and honest, teachers’ expectations for their high school students to become “good citizens” and to “think critically,” or employers’ expectations for their employees to take responsibility for their own work and see the bigger picture (See Kegan, 1994, 18 and 153 respectively). A person’s ability to meet these differing expectations depends on how they organize meaning and how efforts to meet these demands support development by encouraging the formation of particular ways of knowing. Each way of knowing, or level of consciousness, provides a set of tools that we can use to help us address the challenges of life. Kegan contends that far too often today our levels of consciousness (the tools we have to make sense of life) do not fit with and are not adequate for meeting the expectations of society and culture, thus making many of us feel “in over our heads” (1994).

Society makes traditional mental demands on adolescents, in effect, creating a holding environment that will challenge and nurture their psychological development. Traditional mental demands support the third order of consciousness. At this level people are expected to and do rely on an external authority, often without evaluating or critiquing it. The third level of consciousness enables us to be taught or socialized as members of a community; and to develop an ability to meet the traditional expectations, or third level, expectations of society. Most parents hope, for example, that as their children grow towards young adulthood, they will start to become more responsible and trustworthy, develop virtues of patience, tolerance, and kindness, and make the right choices when their parents are not around (see Kegan 1994, 18). Few parents want their children to bully other people or behave negatively towards others because of their religious preferences, race, or cultural background. They want their children to understand why it is important to be respectful and caring, to oblige by the rules of the house, and follow guidelines for living a healthy moral life.

For adolescents to share in their parents or anyone else’s’ point of view, to understand and accept as their own beliefs that certain virtues are important to uphold, they need the capacity for third level knowing, to empathize, to take the perspectives of others as their own. Kegan refers to these expectations and our ability to meet these expectations as the “mental demands of society” that create a holding environment that will challenge and nurture their psychological development.

Classroom Encounters as Holding Environments

This study explores how Kegan’s theory of development and Blasi’s theory of the moral self encourage religious educators to create spaces of encounter in Catholic Secondary schools that nurture mature pluralism towards a sense of shared moral responsibility. Kegan indicates three important functions of a holding environment: “It must hold on. It must let go. And it must stick around so that it can be reintegrated” (1982, 121). Kegan describes these functions as confirmation (holding on), contradiction (letting go), and continuity (remaining in place). This section explores how Catholic secondary classrooms, specifically through a curriculum on “Ecumenical Interreligious Issues,” or world religions, can be created in a way that supports, yet
challenges adolescents to evolve and develop a more complex and moral sense of self towards a mature pluralism by exploring the way a curriculum can confirm, contradict, and endure over time (Kegan 1994, 121).

In designing a classroom as a space for transformative encounters early in the academic year, religious educators can create lessons that support or confirm the second level of consciousness by affirming how some adolescents struggle to take the perspectives of others. Religious educators can first acknowledge how understanding other religious traditions affect themselves and their own religious convictions. A curriculum that confirms adolescents in the second level of consciousness supports their desire for personal mastery and personal achievement (Kegan 1994, 46). Students could; for example, present their own individual work on a religion other than their own, if they practice one, or one they are unfamiliar with if they do not practice any religion. Through small group reflections, students can learn to reflect on how they perceive the faith traditions of others and the impact their perceptions have on their relationships and interactions with others, and on their own developing sense of self.

As the academic year progresses, religious educators can challenge students at the second level of consciousness, while also confirming students who have evolved the third level of consciousness, by providing students with opportunities to work collaboratively, rather than cooperatively, in small groups of their peers. Nationally, over 18% of students enrolled in Catholic schools identify as non-Catholic (McDonald and Schultz 2017), putting religious educators in a unique position to help young people form their own religious identity and learn the skills for dialogue and perspective-taking through encounters with people from other faith traditions and other ways of living.

Organizing small mixed ability heterogeneous groups, for example, on students’ abilities, gifts, and talents or based on their learning style, encourages students to rely on one another. In relying on the gifts and talents of their peers, we encourage students to see the value in one another’s skills and perceptions; the hallmark of the third level of consciousness and of the Christian call to discipleship. Religious educators can begin scaffolding lessons that encourage students to understand the value of communicative virtues through dialogue. For example, teachers might offer a series of lessons that explain and show what patience, tolerance, and empathy look like, then they can ask students to identify these virtues through a series of case studies (using examples and non-examples) or experiences in their own lives. They can begin to practice these skills in structured dialogues with a small group of their peers and then reflect on how those conversations moved them to think differently about others and how they talk to others. Strategies such as role-playing, structured debates, Socratic seminars, scenarios/case studies and collaborative grouping can also help students develop reflective reasoning skills and communicative virtues beyond understanding and mere acquisition of knowledge.

Through extensive research and interviews, Kegan (1994) and his associates have reported that nearly one half to two-thirds of the adult population are still functioning at the third level of consciousness, and not operating fully in the fourth level (191). What is more, very few young adults will evolve past the third order of consciousness before leaving college. Kegan

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1 The majority of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans offer a course on world religions based on the Bishops Framework for “Interreligious Issues” during the senior year of high school. The following examples are from the perspective of a 12th grade world religions class.

proposes that for many the ages between “twelve and twenty [might be] a time during which normal mental development consists in the gradual transformation of mind from the second to the third order” (1994, 37). For many, the early young adult years (around age 18) often mark the beginning of a slow transition towards the third level of mental complexity. This would be particularly true for students enrolled in a World Religions class their senior year. Religious educators can respond to the growing Traditional demands of society providing an important developmental bridge from the second order of consciousness to the third by teaching young people how to encounter the perspectives of others through dialogue.

**Conclusion**

This study takes seriously the need engage religious pluralism through intentional encounters in dialogue by creating to create spaces where young people can experience deep communion and encounter the religious other. In *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, Laurent Daloz et al. (1996) studied the lives of people who overcame the challenges of diversity by actively promoting the common good, or shared moral responsibility, in their daily lives. Keen notes, “From our research, we are convinced that promoting encounters that help people learn to sustain relationships which reach across boundaries of irreducible difference should be among the most important aims of contemporary higher education” (Keen 2000, 207).

The *Framework*, whose goal, quoting Pope John Paul II, “is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (USCCB 2008, 1). This goal aligns with a characteristic of high school age students who have an internal desire to belong, to be a part of a community, and to experience the intimacy of communion. This study focuses on how religious educators can be attentive of the dymanics of creating a mature pluralism in Catholic secondary schools. Burbules and Rice, with McLaren, note "this is the postmodern task of the critical educator - to live with courage and conviction with the understanding that knowledge is always partial and incomplete" (Burbules 1991, 413)

It is increasingly challenging to find spaces in contemporary society to engage with one another in real dialogue. Transformative spaces of encounter can expose young people to a vibrant alternative to the polarizing and discursive discourse common in contemporary society and politics. Teaching adolescents how to listen and better understand the perspectives and religious traditions of others can also help them come to a deeper understanding of their own faith and religious traditions. The art of engaged listening in dialogue is an essential competency for adolescents to learn in secondary schools. In this way, Catholic secondary school curriculums on “Ecumenical and Interreligious Issues” can provided an important developmental bridge from the second order to the third and by teaching pluralism in a way that nurtures the development of the moral self in adolescents.

**Bibliography**


