

# **INTO THE HOLY DARKNESS: IGNATIAN EDUCATION AND THE ADVENT OF JUSTICE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY**

Joseph A. Petriello  
Fordham University

## **Abstract**

How can a pedagogy of creative tension help Ignatian educators problematize the economic and cultural privilege of adolescents to religiously educate them for justice? There are two aims of religious education for justice: the formative immersion of service with the poor and the critical distancing of the academic study of social justice. Exploring the liminal uncertainties at the intersection of postmodern culture, contemporary adolescence, and religious education in Jesuit high schools, the research offers seven suggestions to help navigate the postmodern sensibilities of youth today.

Young people are living in an unprecedented time. Born into a world fraught with uncertainty, they seek identity and meaning in the midst of distraction, disorientation, and disillusionment. Our postmodern era is marked by a holy darkness, revealing pain, suffering, and injustice, yet also hope, beauty, and love. Religious educators need to wrestle with the signs of the times, inviting students to creatively respond to a rapidly changing world. Moving adolescents toward critical understanding and action, religious educators are challenged to more effectively shape their commitment to service and justice. This can be difficult in light of privilege, which can obstruct genuine interaction with persons of difference and hinder a critique of affluence. How can a pedagogy of creative tension help Ignatian educators problematize the economic and cultural privilege of adolescents to religiously educate them for justice?

The religious education of adolescents is central to Jesuit secondary education, shaped by the mission of the Society of Jesus: “the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement” (GC 32, D. 4, n. 32). Jesuit high school students serve generously in day care centers, soup kitchens, nursing homes, and hospitals, working with those often forgotten by society: the young, poor, elderly, and sick. Many students also travel abroad on service immersion trips each year. Despite these tremendous efforts, the church’s commitment to justice in Ignatian education is not yet fulfilled: “If the terms ‘justice’ and ‘education for justice’ carry all the depth of meaning which the church gives them today, we have not educated you for justice” (Arrupe 1974, 2). To speak of a faith that does justice without inculturating the Gospel in a postmodern context will be ineffective, failing to engage the minds and hearts of young people.

## **FORMATIVE IMMERSION AND CRITICAL DISTANCING: THE CREATIVE TENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE**

All education should be concerned with matters of justice, operating within a particular historical, cultural, and intellectual context (Groome 1998; Moran 1981; Wright 2004). The ideal

of Jesuit secondary education is to form students who are open to growth, intellectually competent, religious, loving, and committed to doing justice (JSEA 1981). A religiously educative approach must “challenge our assumptions about what justice is and how to get there,” refusing to reduce lived reality to intellectual abstraction (Moran 1981, 145). Academic dialogue about social justice is incomplete without direct service for and with the poor. According to Moran (1992, 249), “Religious education is composed of two sharply contrasting processes: (1) teaching religion and (2) teaching people to be religious in a particular way.” These two processes can often be blurred together in Jesuit high schools, instead of being held in creative tension. Religious educators need to be “critically present in and to their postmodern world” in order to refashion ways to educate adolescents toward justice (Lakeland 1997, 11). The two aims of religious education as immersive formation and distancing critique provide a holistic framework for Ignatian education to move in that direction.

Ignatian education invites adolescents to enter the experience of the marginalized to learn through dialogue and understanding beyond their comfort zones. Experiences of community, simplicity, prayer, and service can foster a more mature religious way of being in the world. Formative immersion is fundamental to the Ignatian vision: “the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it” (Freire 1970, 39). As adolescents volunteer at home or abroad, they are able in some limited way to see reality from the perspective of the poor, who “offer a ‘privileged hermeneutic’ or primary point of interpretation in our understanding of the world” (Holland and Henriot 1983, 96). In their face-to-face encounter with the suffering other, young people move past stereotypes and abstractions. From this distinctive standpoint, the privileged hermeneutic of the poor presents a new horizon to view the world. Nevertheless, “even with the best of intentions, we can walk in others’ shoes only as the privileged people we are” (Hobgood 2000, 40). The formative immersion of religious education is inherently limited if it stands alone.

The aim of religious education in the distancing of the classroom is to teach religion as an academic subject. Teaching religion is not catechesis; it employs rigorous questioning and critique. The schoolteacher of religion does not tell people what to believe or how to worship. In the dialectic of teaching-learning, students explore the meaning of texts from a skeptical disposition: “No opinion or viewpoint is uncritically accepted as truth” (Scott 2005, 70). The classroom is the space for academic speech that turns back on itself in critical thinking and analysis in order to affirm or dissent what is being taught. Critical distancing of justice education requires an intellectual approach that problematizes economic, political, and social issues to move toward action. The dynamic of teaching-learning engages and disrupts the texts at hand with “resistance to certitude, resistance to cognitive and imaginative closure” (Scott 2005, 66). Both teacher and student become more critically aware of one’s own biases so that the otherness of the text can assert its own truth (Gadamer 1975).

## **IGNATIAN EDUCATION AND POSTMODERN CULTURE**

Ignatian education emerges from a “spirituality of tensions” that is as revolutionary today as it was during the turbulence of the sixteenth century (Kolvenbach 1990, 11). St. Ignatius Loyola envisioned the Spiritual Exercises as a pedagogy of love that calls persons to find God in all things. Becoming more deeply aware of the unmerited grace of divine love, the exercitant responds in gratitude with compassionate acts of service. Men and women for and with others is

simply a contemporary expression of St. Ignatius' desire to help souls. Ignatian spirituality embraces the plurality of Christ's presence in the world, seeking ways to be faithful to the Gospel by speaking its eternal truths for contemporary times. God is already at work in the ordinary, everyday moments of postmodern life.

Ignatian discernment can help develop a critical attitude to the world by uncovering the perils and possibilities of postmodernity. Such an approach must avoid debilitating extremes: the countercultural spiritualism of certain strands of Catholicism on one hand and an increasingly secular social activism without connection to the lived faith of the church on the other. There is no such thing as a comfortable Jesuit education. As Kolvenbach (2001, 155) states, "Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively." As beneficiaries of privilege and affluence, young people need to be liberated from further disconnection from the poor and vulnerable. If adolescents are educated "without the sensibility, the awareness, the reflective skills, and the desire to confront" the injustices of the world, then adults "have not given them a Catholic education adequate for our time" (Buckley 1990, 140).

### **IGNATIAN PEDAGOGY: THE PRAXIS OF EXPERIENCE, REFLECTION, AND ACTION**

Ignatian pedagogy is a continual interchange between experience, reflection, and action. Experience is the ground of all education. Service can be truly educative if it ultimately leads to attitudes and choices that further a lived commitment to justice. Religious educators should evaluate the effectiveness of service programs in light of curriculum and pedagogy in the social justice classroom, so that the teaching-learning conversation adequately builds upon the adolescent encounter with persons in need. Service provides real life experience that brings together the particular horizons of the victims of injustice with the widening perspectives of adolescents who better understand the world and their vocation.

Reflection is the liminal space between experience and action in which persons create and discover meaning, value, and purpose. As an indispensable activity of sifting through seemingly disjointed moments, it fashions a sense of the whole "to become reflective about God's presence or absence in the events of one's daily life" (Fleming 1996, 29). Reflecting on the past within the present moment can help persons better choose what God asks of them. In the context of justice, reflection can also positively offer necessary "time to explore solutions, possible choices, and the possibility for human betterment" amidst standard excessive emphases on injustice and inadequacy (Shelton 1995, 306). Prayerful reflection helps balance action on behalf of justice with the contemplative depth at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Contemplation and action never directly oppose each other; they are mutually intertwined. An intentional goal of religious education is to "invite people to decision, action, and commitment on behalf of justice and not simply to a body of new ideas" (Groome 1983, 79). Encountering the suffering other can result in feelings of guilt, confusion, or indifference among young people. Anxiety can also mark initial efforts to challenge injustices inherent in the dominant socioeconomic system from which they benefit. In light of this, religious educators can help adolescents critically dismantle pejorative, paternalistic, and condescending language about the poor. They can encourage young people to stand with the powerless in solidarity and raise their voices in protest for social change. The beneficiaries and victims of injustice must find

opportunities to work collaboratively, “building awareness, resisting injustice, and organizing to gain the power and resources to be self-reliant and interdependent” (Hessel 1992, 155).

## **POSTMODERN SENSIBILITIES FOR IGNATIAN EDUCATION**

An approach to curriculum and pedagogy in Jesuit high schools that does not respect the creative tension of both aims of religious education is less than adequate for the challenges of our time. There needs to be an ongoing dialectic between moving adolescents in the direction of justice and imagining different ways to get there. Several postmodern sensibilities are offered to problematize the economic and cultural privilege of adolescents to religiously educate them for justice: pedagogy of creative tension, centrality of student experience, openness to ambiguity, hermeneutical receptivity to difference, educational dialectic based on plurality, imaginative use of reflection and play, and social and political transformation.

Postmodernity is marked by new emphases of “difference, plurality, fragmentation, and complexity” through approaches that favor “play, indeterminacy, incompleteness, uncertainty, ambiguity, contingency, and chaos” (Best and Kellner 1997, 255-56). Critically resisting the limits of a modernistic approach, religious education can subvert and deconstruct pedagogical methods that no longer resonate with postmodern generations. The pluralistic and unpredictable processes of a postmodern approach can offer perspectival, intertextual, and hermeneutical lenses beyond the universal, totalizing claims of metanarratives that thrive on closed structures of rigid order and fixed meaning. Since there is no all-encompassing postmodern model of education, these suggestions are simply one vision of contemporary Ignatian education; each is open to further possibilities and critiques.

### ***Pedagogy of Creative Tension***

A pedagogical method of creative tension should exist between both aims of religious education. While friction results in the pull of opposite forces, this necessary tension allows creative possibilities to emerge within Ignatian education: contemplation and action, prayer and apostolic work, charity and justice, service and social analysis. From a postmodern perspective, tradition is not meant to close upon itself through universal claims to truth and authority, but can be a dialogue between ancient wisdom and contemporary experience. A pedagogy of creative tension can fashion educational efforts that respect the continuity of tradition while encountering discontinuities that imagine new ways of expressing those truths. The integration of opposing forces is a living, continual process for lifelong and lifewide religious education, balancing disruptive tendencies with those that can reorder understanding and experience in “a tension between set practices and infinite possibilities, between our need to find closure and our desire to explore” (Doll 1993, 118).

### ***Centrality of Student Experience***

Student experience is central for teaching how to live justly and how to understand justice. Schoolteachers should respect the multilayered, complex, and often contradictory perspectives that students bring to the classroom. The principle of *cura personalis* in Ignatian education can be a pedagogical tool for critically engaging the experiential knowledge in which

students shape their viewpoints and identities. Religious education in postmodernity needs to be “attentive to both the interconnectedness of all experiences and the importance of the autobiographical perspective” (Slattery 2006, 64). Through personal narratives and critical analysis, the dialectic of teaching-learning invites adolescents to share their perspectives, critique injustices, and imagine immediate and long-term possibilities for social change. The distancing of the religion classroom ought to be informed by experiences of Christian service that are curricular standards in Jesuit high schools. Despite formidable critiques, service still remains an adequate and developmentally appropriate way for adolescents to meaningfully participate in church and society.

### ***Openness to Ambiguity***

Ambiguity is a pervasive reality for education concerned with religious questions, since “religion is a fundamentally ambiguous entity” (Wright 2004, 221). Educational forms constantly move between belief and knowledge, reason and doubt, certainty and mystery. There is a playful double meaning within the word “ambiguity,” not only signifying something of doubtful meaning, but also that which has the possibility of multiple interpretations. One cannot seek knowledge through interpretative mediation of the world without directly confronting the uncertainties that beget the possibility of critical response. When young people encounter injustice and suffering, the world appears to be a chaotic mess. Pervasive hegemonic forces can limit adolescent awareness of unjust structures, reinforce stereotypes of the poor, and disconnect them from meaningful social participation. They would like to find definitive solutions and construct order where there is none, but instead learn that “order and chaos are not diametrically and irrevocably opposed but are embedded one within the other” (Doll 1993, 29).

### ***Hermeneutical Receptivity to Difference***

A postmodern emphasis on “different voices, languages, histories, and ways of viewing and experiencing the world” offer a hermeneutical receptivity for encountering the other (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 51). Service experiences with those in need cannot be replicated in the classroom. Reading about domestic hunger is quite unlike serving a meal to guests of a soup kitchen. Receptivity to difference brings young people into dialogue with a complex world that they are only beginning to understand. As adolescents encounter these horizons of difference, they become more receptive to diverse viewpoints and attempt to avoid the tendency to privilege one perspective. Respectful and serious acceptance of alternative positions beyond the familiar scope of the Ignatian tradition leads to an honest struggle to avoid imperialistic or authoritative speech about justice and paternalistic views of the poor.

### ***Educational Dialectic Based on Plurality***

An educational dialectic based on plurality focuses the language of the academic classroom upon the contingent and contextual nature of truth claims: “language does not represent reality, rather it shapes and constructs it” (Best and Kellner 1997, 260). Different ways of speaking about the world present multiple lenses for interpretation depending upon where one is situated. This linguistic turn emphasizes the primacy of subjective discourse, designating multiple teaching languages appropriate to both aims of religious education (Moran 1997).

Religious educators can advocate a multiperspectival sensibility, wherein “no single perspective, theory, or aesthetic frame can illuminate the richness and complexity of the world of experience” (Best and Kellner 1997, 136). Through active production and deconstruction of meaning, greater emphasis is given to the dialectical participation of students. Since meanings are constructed through dialogue, religious educators cannot expect young people to speak and act justly without sustained, reflective, and rigorous dialogue that is ultimately transformative.

### ***Imaginative Use of Reflection and Play***

The religious imagination is essential to Ignatian contemplation and can also shape academic conversation. The modern educational paradigm reduces schooling to predominately rational, definitional knowing within a closed, linear, sequentially ordered curriculum. As Doll (1993, 8) observes, “much of our curriculum to date has trained us to be passive receivers of preordained ‘truths,’ not active creators of knowledge.” Ignatian education should offer open and interactive conversation that allows such creativity. The gravity of social injustice and human suffering can leave young people feeling dejected, guilty, pessimistic, and immobilized. However, there should be moments of eclectic play in educating young people that reflect the hopeful joy of the Christian community. Viable responses to the problems of social injustice can come about through the creativity of those willing to risk these imaginative possibilities.

### ***Social and Political Transformation***

Social and political transformation should permeate both aims of religious education. The prophetic nature of Ignatian education ought to be rooted in the expanding horizons of the teaching-learning dialectic as it seeks the liberation and empowerment of human persons in community. As Wright (2004, 205) argues, “religious education is inevitably a political affair, and will always be intricately related to a network of power-structures.” Grounded in the Catholic Christian theological tradition, the Ignatian vision of social and political transformation places a commitment to doing justice in the wider context of Gospel witness and discipleship in postmodernity. Through a faith that seeks justice, religious education can invite adolescents into meaningful participation that calls for compassion and understanding through a preferential love for the poor and vulnerable. Religious education is ultimately concerned with the transformation of the world toward the reign of God manifested in concrete actions that foster peace, love, and justice in the present moment.

Postmodern sensibilities for Ignatian education can allow deeper and wider conversation about timeless religious questions. Religious educators can challenge adolescents to deeply explore multiple layers of meaning, interpretations, and possibilities surrounding the service of faith and the promotion of justice in a postmodern world. For almost five centuries, Jesuit schools have fostered the education of the young in order to serve church and society toward the transformation of the world. The apostolate of Ignatian education is now moving forward through the crucial changes of a cultural paradigm shift. Complex issues of social justice in the early twenty-first century present the need for religiously educated young women and men who are capable of thinking, feeling, and acting in critically intelligent and genuinely dialogical ways.

## CONCLUSION

In the holy darkness of postmodernity, there can be a pervasive sense of God's distance, a time of advent in which we await the fullness of justice. In order to humbly stand before the "paradoxical gift of God," religious education should explore how "the bedeviling, disorienting, and depressing grip upon us these days just might be signals of an impending *kairos*" (Clendenen 2006, 69-70). The postmodern condition is the threshold through which new possibilities may be attempting to break through the indifference, apathy, and complacency of young people and adults. There is an energy that comes from embracing this darkness when one recognizes that it may be the means through which God tests a community of faith. God's reign of peace and justice is waiting to emerge in this age of uncertainty in which God seems a distant mystery.

Ignatian education for justice must remain centered on the hope of all efforts to religiously educate: "Jesus, the expression of God's love: crucified, powerless, dead, defeated, and meaningless—yet in the same breath resurrected, creative, purposeful, resplendent and alive" (Wren 1986, 118). The disruption of the incarnation of Jesus Christ into this world continues to awaken persons of privilege out of their complacency. The need for religious education to move adolescents in the direction of justice is greater than ever before. To walk humbly with God today, we must walk through uncertainty to meet Christ in the liminal space of the road, to seek the advent of justice that is here, but not yet. To find God in all things, we must seek God's hidden presence in the holy darkness of our times.

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