

Patrick Manning
Boston College
manninpi@bc.edu
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Sexting, Symbols, and Sanctification:

The Role of Religious Education in the Making and Un-making of Violent Imaginations

Abstract

Though indispensable to meaningful living, the imagination is also the gateway through which violence enters the world. This paper explores this ambivalence as it relates to the potential of religious education to both stem and exacerbate the violence originating in the imagination. Drawing upon research in moral formation, cognitional theory, and transformative learning theory, the author examines a recent high school “sexting” scandal, analyzes what led to this incident, and draws implications for how religious education can deter rather than perpetuate such instances of violence.

Introduction

Last year at this conference I presented a paper arguing for the benefits of engaging young people in conversation around religious symbols as part of their preparation for life in today's pluralistic public spaces. In my conclusion I added a brief warning about the dangers inherent in symbolic thinking, a danger which the conference organizers have acknowledged in proposing this year's topic of cultural and religious imagination in the making and unmaking of violence. In the time since I issued that warning, an event transpired within my own local community that, unfortunately, exemplified the sort of dangers about which I was and remain concerned. Taking this incident as a case study, I address these dangers head-on in this paper.

In so doing, my aim is not to report all the details of this incident so much as to address the deeper questions that this incident raises about the workings of human imagination, the challenges presented by the current cultural milieu, and the role of religious education in the making and un-making of violent imaginations. I begin by describing a "sexting" scandal that occurred at a local high school in February of this past year, using this example as an entrée into a more general discussion of the dangers inherent in the human imagination. In the two following sections I discuss how religious education can, on the one hand, contribute to the making of violent imaginations and, on the other, serve to sanctify them.

The Dangers of the Human Imagination

CBS Boston reports that in February of this past year a group of 15 underclassmen girls at Walpole High School in Massachusetts texted nude photos of themselves to a number of upperclassmen boys.¹ The photos were soon widely circulated throughout the school. While the girls endured no physical harm in this incident, they have suffered real violence in terms of the violation of the dignity of their bodies and extreme public humiliation in the eyes of their peers, families, school officials, and the wider community.² As for the male students, some of whom were 18 years old, were it not for the leniency of the police and the juvenile magistrate, they might have been charged with possession and distribution of child pornography.³ Had this been the case, the boys would have served a prison sentence of up to 10 years and been labeled sex offenders for the rest of their lives. As the matter stands, they will endure the less severe—but, nonetheless, very real—consequences of public shame and academic disciplining. Sadly, journalists inquiring into the case have found that this incident is indicative of a widespread culture of sexting in this high school and others. "Every school does it," reported one Walpole High junior. "We just happen to be the one school who got caught."⁴

"The impoverishment and alienation of the self, as well as the destruction of others, issues from a reasoning of the heart that uses evil imagination."⁵ Richard Niebuhr wrote these words in 1941, long before the first "sext" message was sent, but recent events have only served to

¹ Jim Armstrong, "Walpole High School And Police Investigating Sexting Between Students," CBS Boston, February 26, 2014, <http://boston.cbslocal.com/2014/02/26/walpole-high-school-investigating-sexting-between-students/>.

² The age difference between the underclassmen girls and upperclassmen boys also suggests a power differential that may reflect its own subtle form of violence. Even though no one physically coerced the girls to pose for these pictures, it is certainly not a healthy situation in which so many young women feel compelled to violate their own dignity in order to attract attention or garner other social benefits.

³ Brittney McNamara, "School Officials Back Court Decision in Walpole High Sexting Case," *The Patriot Ledger*, April 14, 2014, <http://www.patriotledger.com/article/20140414/News/140418771>.

⁴ Armstrong, "Walpole High School And Police Investigating Sexting Between Students."

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 75.

reaffirm the wisdom of his words. All human-originated violence begins in the imagination. It is for this reason that idolatry is portrayed as the paradigmatic sin in the Hebrew Scriptures and that Islam and some sects of Judaism and Protestant Christianity prohibit human-made images.

Whatever prohibitions we might impose, we can never escape the influence of images altogether. Images and imagination are an indispensable part of human cognition. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio defines a “mind” as none other than “the ability to display images internally and to order those images in a process called thought.”⁶ Over 2,000 years earlier, Aristotle similarly wrote, “the mind never thinks without an image.”⁷ In the intervening time, the leading authorities in every age—from Thomas Aquinas to Albert Einstein—have acknowledged the essential role of images in cognition.⁸

What exactly is that role? As Paul Ricoeur has famously observed, thought begins from the symbol.⁹ The generation of mental images provides clues to new insights and the material for thought.¹⁰ The manipulation and modification of those images then plays a subsequent role in attaining to new knowledge.¹¹ On a more sophisticated level, the repertoire of images we bring to a situation determines what we experience and learn and how we behave.¹² Those images form the interpretive lenses—the “meaning perspectives,” as Jack Mezirow calls them—through which we evaluate the meaning of our experiences and develop a system of beliefs and habits of expectation and behavior.¹³ Whether one sees life as a rat race or a gift to be savored or God as a distant clockmaker or a loving, personal Being determines one’s experience of life in this the world. Indeed, without this ability to generate and modify mental images that we call “imagination,” we would not be able to respond intelligently and meaningfully to our environment.¹⁴

Necessary though it is, the imagination is an ambivalent power. The evangelist recognizes as much when he quotes Jesus, “The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness” (Mt 6:22-23). Bernard Lonergan explains the source of the danger thus: When we have a question—whether implicit or explicit—mental images provide the pivot between the question and an answer. However, as we have all experienced on numerous occasions, the understanding that emerges from that image is not always correct. When we fail to reasonably judge the appropriateness or truth of our ideas, there opens a gap between what we think we

⁶ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 89.

⁷ Aristotle, “De Anima,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 431a, 16.

⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q.79, a.4, r.3; and Albert Einstein, cited in Jacques Hadamard, *An Essay on the Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), 142.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Symbol: Food for Thought,” *Philosophy Today* 4 (September 1, 1960), 197. For my purposes here, it will suffice to define a symbol as an image that evokes multiple meanings.

¹⁰ Here I use “image” in the more technical sense of a mental representation such as may come to a person’s consciousness in visual, audible, or other forms. When discussing examples from popular culture and marketing, I employ the term in the more common sense of a visually perceived picture, symbol, projection, etc.

¹¹ See Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 105; cf. Lonergan, *Insight*, 35.

¹² See Arthur W. Staats and Jeffrey M. Lohr, “Images, Language, Emotions, and Personality: Social Behaviorism’s Theory,” *Journal of Mental Imagery* 3, no. 1–2 (1979): 90.

¹³ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 42.

¹⁴ The higher-level imaginative work of constructing and participating in our reality is what Charles Taylor means when he speaks of “social” and “cosmic imaginaries” and what Sandra Schneiders means when she speaks about a person’s “world”. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 323, and Sandra M. Schneiders, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2013), 37.

know and what we actually know. “It is through this gap,” warns Lonergan, “that there proudly march the speculative gnostic and the practical magician,” and, I might add, the buzzword-brandishing talking head and the marketing guru.¹⁵

Modern marketers take advantage of the fact that many people will act impulsively and without due reflection upon the images they perceive. People buy clothing because they imagine it will make them look more stylish without properly judging if they can afford it. They “supersize” their meals because they imagine they will be more satisfied without reflecting on the consequences for their health. Or, in the case of the students at Walpole High, they send and forward nude photos because they imagine doing so will make others perceive them as sexy or cool without considering that their actions could lead to personal humiliation or imprisonment. Such manipulation on the part of corporations and individuals, while subtle, is every bit as much a form of violence as coercing an intoxicated person into intercourse or assaulting a defenseless person on the street. Indeed, when reflective judgment is short-circuited, all manner of violence may be wrought in people’s imaginations and in their lives.¹⁶

Religious Education’s Complicity in Forming Violent Imaginations

Few will dispute the claim that modern marketing often has a corrupting effect on people’s imaginations, but we are less inclined to recognize the capacity of formal education, including religious education, for the same.¹⁷ In truth, Christian institutions of learning have produced the very people who burnt supposed witches and heretics, and preachers citing Scripture have too often fueled bigotry and religious conflict. As Paolo Freire has argued, even when acting with the best of intentions, educators can unwittingly perpetuate cycles of violence through unexamined pedagogical methods.¹⁸ In light of these considerations, we might wonder if the sparks of violent imagination that ignited the Walpole sexting scandal were somehow—perhaps inadvertently—fanned in Sunday services or religious education classrooms. In the hopes of avoiding more incidents like this one, I will draw attention to a couple of pedagogical miscues whereby religious educators may fuel violent imaginations.

The first of these is the failure to attend to the images already at play in learners’ minds. Possessing a theologically rich, life-giving vision for how one hopes to form one’s students does not guarantee that that vision will come to fruition. The difficulty is that education is never a work *ex nihilo*. Such is the central insight of constructivist theories like those of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, which is now generally accepted among educational theorists and practitioners.¹⁹ Learners play a crucial role in constructing their own knowledge; it cannot be simply imposed

¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Volume 3*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1992), 565.

¹⁶ I describe as “violent” any action that is detrimental to a person’s wellbeing—physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual—regardless of whether or not the injured party somehow consented to the action in question or is fully conscious of the harm done. As suggested above, not all violence is physical. In truth, some of the most insidious forms of violence are those which mar the soul without leaving any marks on the body.

¹⁷ Of course, not all advertising is negative. For a positive example, see this ad from Guinness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Vxjh6KJi8E>

¹⁸ See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1994).

¹⁹ To affirm the basic claim that learners play an active role in constructing knowledge is not to ignore the challenges of deriving effective pedagogical approaches from this insight. For a multi-perspectival treatment of this issue, see, e.g., S. Tobias and T. M. Duffy, *Constructivist Instruction: Success or Failure?* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009) as well as P. A. Kirschner, J. Sweller, and R. E. Clark, “Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-based, Experiential, and Inquiry-based Teaching,” *Educational Psychologist* 41 (2): 75–86.

from without. Effective education, therefore, depends upon connecting with the images already at play in people's minds.

Attending to these dynamics of human cognition is especially important in the present era, in which our imaginations are utterly saturated with images from popular media and product marketing.²⁰ To simply refuse to acknowledge pervasive sexualized images or hedonism-inspiring music, as some educators and textbook authors elect to do, is not merely inadequate; it is outright negligent. It is likewise insufficient to merely denounce negative images. Our minds are not operated by switches that we can turn on or off at will. Rather, consciousness and thought are constituted by a continuous flow of images. Telling someone not to think about something will only succeed in bringing that image to mind. It is far more effective to modify the image or gradually replace it.²¹ Along these lines, Philip Keane has suggested that a healthy sexuality requires allowing sexual images to come to mind, rather than repressing them, and then mentally modifying them.²²

In the wake of the Walpole sexting incident, the superintendent of schools assured the public that the infraction had resulted from lack of good judgment on the students' parts, not from a failure of policy. However, we might wonder, Did the education these students received about sexting ever go beyond simple prohibitions? Did anyone ever make an effort to help these students address the sexualized images they are exposed to on a daily basis? Pitted against this flood of images, a flat prohibition on students exchanging such images themselves is unlikely to prove very influential. In order to counteract the violence being done to students' imaginations elsewhere, educators need to address those violent images directly.

Another way religious educators may become complicit in the formation of violent imaginations is by stifling learners' imaginations. The power of images derives in great part from their affective valence. The more concrete and deeply rooted in experience an image is, the greater its affective force. Concepts, doctrine, and abstract reasoning, by contrast, are more remote from experience and therefore have less affective force.²³ To be sure, concepts and doctrine have an important role insofar as they enrich symbolic language by providing greater explicitness and clarity.²⁴ Without them, an unbridled imagination can easily veer off into superstition and other cognitive errors.²⁵ Conversely, when educators fail to balance theory with

²⁰ According to one estimate, the average North American sees some 6,000 marketing messages each day. See Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, "Beyond the Culture Jam," in *Critical Pedagogies: Living and Learning in the Shadow of the 'Shopocalypse'*, ed. Jennifer A. Sandlin and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 2010), 224.

²¹ In the words of Niebuhr, "The errors and superstitions fostered by bad imagination in this realm cannot be overcome by eliminating ideas...but only by more adequate images of the same order" (*The Meaning of Revelation*, 79). Andrew Greeley similarly writes, "the only way it [church leadership] can guide and direct the development of that religious sensibility is not denouncing it, not trying to limit it or contain it, but rather influencing its direction and flow through works of the fine and lively arts" (*Americans Since the Council: An Unauthorized Report* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1985), 222).

²² Phillip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics and Imagination: A Theological Inquiry* (Paulist Press, 1984), 162.

²³ On the greater proximity of images to experience than concepts see, e.g., Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 93 and Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 231.

²⁴ On this point, see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 294, n.57. Lonergan would add that theory enables us to know things as they are rather than merely as they seem to us.

²⁵ See Lonergan, *Insight*, 560–6.

imaginative modes of instruction, learners lose interest and grow lethargic in their thinking.²⁶ For example, students will be less engaged by a discussion of how the sacraments can be categorized into sacraments of initiation, vocation, and healing than they will be by a discussion of the symbolic meaning of the sacraments. Teaching that merely imposes information on learners, in the words of Freire, “inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness.”²⁷ Even if one begins from symbols, over-interpreting and imposing lengthy explanations on them can have the same effect.

The ultimate danger in this pedagogical blunder is this: Human beings are engineered to attend most carefully to the experiences and input that generate the strongest emotions, which means that the battle for the mind is first a battle for the heart.²⁸ Every day our students make their way through a world of advertisements and entertainment that is fine-tuned to maximize stimulation. If religious educators have any hope of counteracting the negative messages of this titillating machine, we need to stimulate students’ imaginations through the sorts of images that will promote responsible Christian living. Returning to the example of Walpole, we might ask how these students were taught to respect the human body. Was an attractive vision of the goodness of the human body and of chaste living presented to them, or were they merely lectured about school policies and bland moral platitudes?

Sanctifying the Imagination

Though there is a dark potential to the human imagination and though the influences that sway it that way are ubiquitous, images can be the source of salvation. Indeed, as Richard Niebuhr reflects, conversion does not occur without them.²⁹ Therefore, religious educators need not feel helpless in the battle for students’ imaginations. In addition to avoiding the sorts of pedagogical pitfalls just examined, educators can take a number of active measures to form their students’ imaginations in a distinctly Christian manner. In Walpole, a local youth minister made efforts to do just that, providing us with a model for sanctifying imaginations in the face of vitiating influences.

Many of the Catholic students at Walpole High School are parishioners at a nearby Catholic parish, where most go through the Confirmation program during their freshman and sophomore years. Two weeks after news of the sexting scandal broke, the youth minister at the parish scrapped the scheduled agenda for the monthly Confirmation class and instead facilitated a presentation and discussion of relationships and sexuality, which reflected a number of the pedagogical considerations addressed in this paper.

First, she directly engaged the popular images already at play in her students’ minds. Specifically, she drew attention to the sexualized images elicited by popular songs like Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” and Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse,” which were receiving ample radio play at the time, and challenged her students to think about the negative effects of internalizing the messages of these songs. She also played a clip of a talk by Kerry Cronin, a popular young

²⁶ See Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 147 on the correlation between positive/negative body-states and fast/slow reasoning and generation of images. You might observe this phenomenon for yourself as you read this paper and others for the conference. Note when you feel more energized and when your thinking accelerates versus when you feel yourself losing interest and your thoughts slowing. In all likelihood, these changes will often correspond to sections of the paper that are more concrete or more abstract.

²⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 64. Emphasis original.

²⁸ Damasio states the matter this way: “Somehow, what does not come naturally and automatically through the primacy of feeling cannot be maintained in the mind” (*Descartes’ Error*, 154).

²⁹ See Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 89.

professor at Boston College, in which the speaker addresses the “hook-up culture” that is so pervasive at BC and many other undergraduate institutions.³⁰ In this clip, Cronin relates stories of students who have shared with her their profound frustration with the culture of quick sexual gratification, thereby revealing the dark side of the sexualized culture that is typically glorified in popular media.

Showing this video clip had the double effect of not only challenging pernicious images of human sexuality but also providing students with an alternative image—that of a successful, well-adjusted woman who has been able to achieve a sense of fulfillment without objectifying herself or others for the sake of sexual gratification.³¹ In addition to this video, the youth minister presented several other images of healthy personhood and sexuality. Displaying attractive images in a dynamic Prezi presentation, she evoked the Scriptural theme of humans’ creation in God’s “image and likeness” (Gen 1:26). She also showed a clip of Lupita Nyong’o, star of the film *12 Years a Slave*, speaking about her struggles with her black skin and gradually recognizing her own inner beauty.³² Encouraging more active engagement, the youth minister later invited students to envision how they might practice chaste living in their own lives by setting some kind of goal for themselves and employing some symbol as a reminder of that commitment. Finally, it should be noted that, rather than simply lecturing the students on Catholic teaching about sexuality, she employed a variety of dynamic images and videos and engaged the students in conversation so as to stimulate rather than stifle thought and imagination.

What more could have been done? For one thing, although the youth minister made sure to ask students questions and to allow some time for personal reflection, she could have done more to promote authentic cognition on the part of her students. This is not a trivial critique because facilitating authentic cognition—that is, patterned acts of attending, understanding, judging, and deciding—is what separates persuasive instruction from manipulation.³³ Furthermore, without promoting such critical consciousness, religious educators have no hope for counteracting the barrage of sultry images that beset young people every day.³⁴ In the case of this parish program, the youth minister, beyond asking students about their understanding of the term “chastity” and inviting them to brainstorm ways to live it out, might have included explicit opportunities for students to raise questions about the vision of chastity she was presenting and to render their own judgments about the plausibility of this proposal.

³⁰ The video clip can be accessed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3eyFgTHmzE>. The youth minister showed a segment from 5:00 to 7:00.

³¹ While nearly every everything in the youth minister’s presentation was equally applicable to boys as well as girls, it is worth noting that the strongest examples of positive role models were both women. As evidenced in the case at Walpole High, men and women face different challenges (as well as many similar ones) when navigating sexual relationships and often fall into different social scripts. Taking this fact into account, discussions of sexuality should ideally acknowledge these differences and address them appropriately, e.g., by presenting male role models, who refuse to objectify women or themselves, in addition to female role models.

³² This clip can be accessed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPCkfARH2eE>.

³³ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 6–13; cf. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 66.

³⁴ Again, consider the fact that the average North American sees some 6,000 marketing messages each day (see n.18 above). That figure is likely higher for adolescents, who spend more time on smartphones and the Internet than the average adult. Religious education will never be able to match the world of marketing and entertainment image for image, nor do salutary Christian images generally compare in intensity with the sexualized images that are so pervasive in popular culture. Hence the importance of not only providing salutary images but also empowering young people to critically evaluate the images presented to them by the wider culture.

As a final note, all of the above should be done as a matter of course in religious education, not only in response to scandal. While religious educators will never be able to match popular media and marketing image for image, we stand to greatly improve our odds in the battle for students' imaginations by adopting a more intentional, systematic approach to the task.

Conclusion

The sexting scandal that occurred in Walpole earlier this year was not an isolated incident. Such occurrences are indicative of a culture in which a flood of violent images saturates our imaginations, inevitably leading to harmful actions. Immersed in such a culture, it is imperative that religious educators give serious attention to how they employ or neglect images in their teaching. Overwhelming though the challenges may seem, Christian educators have recourse to a vision of incomparable power—the vision of the reign of God bestowed on us by Jesus Christ. The images of modern media and marketing may be ubiquitous and dazzling, but they are incapable of satisfying the deepest longings of the human heart. For that only one image suffices—the image of the living God. As Christian educators, we are called to image Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; Col 1:15). If we succeed in that, we greatly improve the likelihood that our students will themselves seek to become images of God rather than symbols of sex.

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