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Plagues and Possibilities: A Reconsideration of the Religious Education of the Young Child in Light of Peace Education

In light of correspondence between the enculturation of children and the cycle of violence, I consider the impact of religious education on the cultivation of moral courage in young children. I explore two programs-traditional and Montessori. First, I compare the scope and sequence of each, considering the influences of the texts presented. Second, I compare the influence of the respective pedagogies. Based on these comparisons and studies done on the benefits of the Montessori environment for peace education, I suggest the latter program as tool to interrupt the cycle of violence.

Plagues: Considerations of Moral Consciousness in Religious Education of Young Children

My daughter's Kindergarten Sunday school class had been studying Moses. One day, when I went to pick her up, I learned that morning's story had been about the ten plagues. Everyone was working intently on a mural, when a five-year-old girl, Abby, smiled up at me from her drawing, and said, "Look at my dead puppy! He has sores!" Indeed, she had drawn a purple puppy, lying belly up, and was adding the red blotches as she spoke.

It may not have been what her teacher intended, but Abby had internalized the biblical message. While it is probably safe to say that no religious educator goes into their classroom intending to see drawings of dead puppies, many of the biblical stories taught to young children contain such startling details.¹

Abby's teacher and the authors of her curriculum probably intended for the students to learn about God's great power and liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. In fact, they may have been so familiar with this uplifting interpretation of the Exodus story that they did not think anything of the sixth plague, in which:

...the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of soot from the kiln...and [it] shall cause festering boils on humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt." (Ex 9:8-9, NRSV)

However, the *Spark Story Bible* that Abby's class read describes each plague vividly, recounting the boils as: "Oozy, gooey, icky sores / On everybody's skin."² While it goes onto describe

¹ Other examples include Noah and the flood, Daniel in the lion's den, the battle of Jericho, and even the parting of the Red Sea; to say nothing of New Testament narratives such as the escape to Egypt or the house on the rock, though these latter accounts tend to be painted with a softer brush in most Christian children's literature.

² Patti Thisted Arthur et. al., *Spark Story Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009) 81.

Moses' victory and the Israelites' liberation, for Abby, it was the pain of the animals that sunk in.³ God is a God who frees the Israelites. God is also a God who gives puppies oozy, gooey sores.

This disconnect left me to question the result of presenting too much unmediated information into the concrete world of young children before they are capable of abstracting specific morals out of the details. Is it possible that we are teaching our kindergartners that some dogs (and people) deserve sores? And what about the other 'classic' Bible stories we tell our children?⁴

In 2007 my church body issued a call that I believe is applicable across denominations: "That the whole church become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word."⁵ As an educator, I remain committed to the full inclusion of young children in the body of Christ, including giving them access to the Christian Scriptures. However, this experience left me questioning how such access is being provided—especially when the Scriptures the children first encounter are not translations, but illustrated paraphrases themselves.

To that end, this paper proposes an intentional scope and sequencing of curriculum material intended to familiarize children with the biblical message while remaining appropriate to their spiritual and developmental capacities. Because such capacities are vast and each deserves intensive consideration, this paper focuses specifically on those capacities that foster peace in opposition to judgment and conflict. I set as the determining criterion of an appropriate curriculum the proper development of a young child's *moral consciousness*. The goal in such a curriculum is thus to present biblical material that forms young children in intentional peaceful habits rather than unintentionally fostering the opposite results. In order to test the feasibility of this goal, two curriculum types for the young child (age 3 – Kindergarten) are considered—first, Spark Sunday School (published by Augsburg Fortress) as representative of a traditional Bible foundation approach and second, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, as developed by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, as representative of a Montessorian spiritual based approach.

³ This is not surprising given her inability, at the age 5, to yet think in abstractions. Jean Piaget's theory of development outlines four developmental stages: Sensorimotor, Preoperational, Concrete Operations, and Formal Operations. While this theory has been nuanced and developed, the general premise that children in the second stage (between 2 and 7 years old) "are not yet able to conceptualize abstractly" remains widely accepted (cf. Jean Piaget, *Origins of Intelligence in the Child*, [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1936]).

⁴ The same children's Bible depicts the sad and frightened residents of Jericho peering over the city walls as Joshua and the Israelites march around and eventually topple their walls. Nothing is said about what happens to these people when "Huge stones crashed to the ground." In the final illustration, only the triumphant priests and a pile of rubble remain. (Arthur et. al., 102-105). Here might we be inadvertently condoning the knocking down of other children's block towers? Or worse? What about Noah's flood? Or the celebration of the destruction of the house of the foolish man in the parable of the men who build their homes respectively out of sand and rocks?

⁵ ELCA Churchwide Assembly (2007) cited in *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* by Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell, and Stanley N. Olson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008) vii.

Programs: A Comparison of Augsburg Fortress' Spark Sunday School Curriculum and Sofia Cavalletti's Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

According to its publishers, the *Spark Story Bible* is intended for children between age 2 and 2nd grade.⁶ It is published along with a grade specific *Spark* Sunday School curriculum and together they are representative of traditional approaches to Sunday School education available on the contemporary market.⁷ It contains 150 individual stories and is advertised to “[open] up God’s Word to kids through colorful art and rich retellings of...the most popular Bible stories.”⁸ This large collection of “favorite” or “popular” Bible stories is determined by the adult editorial team and publishers and then paraphrased in accessible language in order to acquaint children with as wide a foundation on the biblical narrative as possible.

Such an aim is explicitly reflected in Augsburg Publishing house’s description of their *Spark Story Bible*, which they tout as “an excellent foundation for a biblical education” that “encourages imagination through images and text that’s engaging, thought-provoking, and fun!”⁹ Indeed, my anecdotal experience with Abby seems to have proved these goals a success—Abby certainly understood and creatively engaged with the details of the story which she was presented. Paradigmatically, then from this description can be drawn two explicit aims of this Bible and the curriculum to which it is attached. First, is to build a broad foundation for biblical literacy at an early age—not surprising given the publication date of the Bible by the publishing house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America two years after the adoption of the above quoted resolution to foster biblical literacy across the church. And second is to do so in a way that encourages thoughtful engagement and identification with the texts at what can implicitly be inferred as an age appropriate level. One way in which this latter aim is achieved is through discussion questions appended to the end of each individual story, asking such things as, following the narrative of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37-50), “Have you ever had an

⁶ “Spark Story Bible,” accessed 3 September 2014, <http://store.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/8122/Spark-Story-Bible>. Used here as representative of a traditional Sunday School story Bible and curriculum.

⁷ The Zondervan *Beginner’s Bible* (2005) contains more than 90 Bible stories, including the 10 plagues (cf. 104-110) and the American Bible Society’s *Read and Learn Bible* presents “a collection of favorite stories from the Old and New Testaments paraphrased for young readers” in line with the society’s “single mission of making the Bible available to as many people as possible so that all may experience its life-changing message” and lists 106 separate narratives—including two dedicated to the imposition of the plagues on Egypt—in its table of contents (Eva Moore, *Read and Learn Bible* [New York: Scholastic Inc., 2005] iii). Moreover, while more condensed story Bibles, such as the *Rhyme Bible Storybook* (1996), another Zondervan publication, includes only 35 stories, but manages to fit in an abbreviated account of the plagues as part of Moses’ story condensed under the heading, “Out of Egypt” (cf. 122). Typical curriculums used in conjunction with each of these story Bibles aim to present the details of the story in order to give the child a foundational knowledge of the events, often attached with a cursory moral lesson.

⁸ “Spark Story Bible.”

⁹ “Spark Story Bible.”

exciting dream? What was it about? How did it make you feel?”¹⁰ Or, returning the plagues, “What plague would you least like to have come to you and your family? Why?”¹¹

As an alternative, I compare this curriculum, representative of a traditional educational approach, to the first level of Sofia Cavalletti’s Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a Montessori based religious education program developed for children between age 3 and Kindergarten. The aim of the first level of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is to “announce God’s love and help the child to experience and enjoy it in prayer and reflection.”¹² This is in response to what Cavalletti identifies as “the child’s fundamental need [in early childhood] to be loved with a protective love, and to have someone to love.”¹³ In the course of religious education, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd assumes that God—particularly, “[f]or the younger child, the ‘face of God’ [seen in] Jesus, the Good Shepherd,” serves as an ideal source and object for their love. Gianna Gobbi explains, “The parable of the Good Shepherd (found in John 10) [on which the Catechesis curriculum is centered] contains a message of the totality and universality of God’s love.”¹⁴ To this end, the curriculum is concerned less with a breadth of material—providing a foundation for biblical knowledge—and rather with a depth of material—providing a foundation for moral and spiritual formation, alongside the reception of biblical truths.

This encounter with God’s love is achieved through the selective presentation of 8 narratives from Jesus’ life and the life of the church, along with 5 prophecies about the coming of Jesus, 1 psalm, and 8 parables from his teachings, for a total of 22 stories. These stories are drawn, not from a traditional story Bible, but instead from the text of the same Bible translation used in the child’s primary worship environment. For the convenience of the child, the catechist is encouraged to transcribe these texts from the Bible in individual pamphlets to accompany each story, or can purchase Cavalletti’s translation of the original Greek and Hebrew texts into such pamphlets through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd association. Cavalletti justifies the narrowing of this scope with an intentional aim toward cultivating a deep relationship between the young child and Jesus. She explains, the adult “should not offer too many stimuli [to the young child]. We should not alter too often or too rapidly the object of the child’s attention, in which case the child would defend himself with intentional indifference to this kind of wearying, continuous movie. If the child does not have time to dwell on anything then everything will come to seem the same to him and he will lose interest in all things.”¹⁵ The foundation that the Catechesis curriculum seeks to build is therefore based upon a unity of message rather than a diversity of experiences at this point.

In later levels of her education program, this depth is built upon as children are exposed to the greater breadth of biblical narratives at more developmentally appropriate ages—usually after

¹⁰ Arthur et. al., 53.

¹¹ Arthur et. al., 83.

¹² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter and ed. Barbara Schmich Searle (Mt. Ranier, MD: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1992) 153.

¹³ Cavalletti, 152.

¹⁴ Gianna Gobbi *Listening to God With Children: The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children*, trans. and ed. Rebekah Rojcewicz (Loveland, OH: Treehaus, 1998) 89.

¹⁵ Cavalletti, 140.

the age of six years old. At such later developmental stages, children are better able to abstract about themes such as liberation and oppression and to discern common themes and appropriate moral behavior even from the more difficult biblical texts. Gobbi explains, “[D]uring this period—from age 6 to 9—there is a sensitive period for moral reasoning. The child of this age has a particular sensitivity toward and interest in distinguishing good from evil, as well as between right and wrong actions. If we try to engage the child in moral reasoning at an earlier age, when a natural interest in moral issues has not yet awakened in the child, we risk making him or her either over scrupulous or insensitive.”¹⁶ In other words, when a very young child is taught morality she is likely either to internalize the lesson into her still developing sense of order, thus taking it to the extreme—what Gobbi describes as “over scrupulous”—or to become overwhelmed, as Cavalletti describes in the case of overexposure to a diversity of stimuli, thus shutting down the child’s moral capacities altogether such that she becomes “insensitive.” To this, I add the related risk, given the vivid language and illustrations in many children’s Bibles and curricula available today, of misinterpreting or confusing the moral message with the possible consequence of again shutting down the child’s moral compass due to a lack of ability to differentiate.

To illustrate this danger, Cavalletti describes a vignette similar to that of my experience with Abby in the Sunday school classroom:

If we tried to give the child [from three to six years] a direct moral formation we would have the same result as a nursery school teacher who wanted to tell the children about the parable of the prodigal son; the children’s only reaction to this parable was the question: ‘What happened to those pigs?’ ...The children responded in the only way appropriate to their age: Since they are in a sensitive period for protection, they were struck only by the fact that the swine were left abandoned, and the whole problematic of sin and conversion completely escaped them.¹⁷

In psychic and religious terms, the children approach each story that they hear in relation to their deep need for security, order, and trust. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd seeks to meet these needs through a carefully orchestrated encounter with God’s love that responds “to the child’s silent request: ‘Help me to come closer to God by myself.’”¹⁸ In developmental and pedagogical terms, the child, who has not yet reached an age of abstraction, is unable to differentiate the broader themes of the parable and instead latches onto the concrete details of the story, such as the well-being of the pigs, which are more representative of her concrete stage of reasoning. This same analysis could also be applied to Abby’s concern for the animals affected by the plagues, rather than the broader theme of liberation, which the curriculum intended to present.

Possibilities: A Proposal of Where to Go From Here in Fostering Peace Education

¹⁶ Gobbi, 88-89.

¹⁷ Cavalletti, 151.

¹⁸ Cavalletti, 45.

When one moves beyond the need to win a popularity contest among (or sell books and curriculum to) an adult population, concern the spiritual and developmental appropriateness and impact of particular biblical stories comes to the forefront in selecting a religious education curriculum for young children. Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi believe they have found this formula in the implementation of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.¹⁹ However, when one moves beyond the respective goals of the Catechesis curriculum to connect children deeply with God and the curricula such as Spark to provide children with a broad foundation in the biblical narrative, both within what their own researched and implemented developmentally appropriate means, the question remains, which curriculum best forms young children to be faithful citizens of the world. To this end, I turn to the criteria given by Jesus to all of his disciples (including the youngest among them) to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27, NRSV).

While the emphasis on the development of a relationship between God and the young child may at this point seem clear within the Catechesis curriculum, and already points to the fostering of love in general rather than hatred, I propose a deeper consideration of the potential for this curriculum over and against standard curricula specifically lives out the latter half of Jesus’ commandment—the love of neighbor. To this end, I resonate with Maria Montessori when she writes, “True peace... suggests the triumph of justice and love among men: it reveals the existence of a better world wherein harmony reigns.”²⁰ In order to live out Christ’s command to love the neighbor, the establishment of peace is a prerequisite. Experiencing the assurance of the constancy of God’s love through the presentations in Catechesis provides the beginning steps towards the construction of such harmony in the child’s family and public life as well. D. Vidulich rightly notes that “Montessori education in its great respect for each child is inherently nonviolent.”²¹ Within the Catechesis curriculum, lessons in silence, prayer, and concentration, as well as the order of the room itself—building confidence through the child’s natural desire for order—all contribute to this sense of well-being.

What is needed is a curriculum that moves a children towards their natural inclinations towards love and security as valued moral aims. In this way, the educator can begin to take seriously the child not as an object of dependence to be taught, but rather as “a regenerator of our race and of society” with and from whom we can learn.²² This, at its heart, is an education toward peace. Indeed, as Montessori concludes, “Preventing conflicts is the world of politics, establishing peace is the work of education.”²³ To this end, the confidence and independence of the child are

¹⁹ With regard to their curriculum’s aim of “education to wonder,” Cavalletti explains, “It is the educator’s task... to offer the child’s wonder an object capable of taking the child always farther and deeper into the awareness of reality, an object whose frontiers are always expanding as the child slowly proceeds in the contemplation of it. We believe that the Gospel offers us such an object” (Cavalletti, 140).

²⁰ Maria Montessori, *Peace and Education* (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1943) 7.

²¹ D. Vidulich “Montessori program aims at peace in a world of violence,” *National Catholic Reporter* 33:1 (1997) 28.

²² Maria Montessori, *Peace and Education*, 16.

²³ Montessori, 27.

crucial. Cheryl Duckworth explains, “While these qualities [confidence and independence] may not be immediately associated with peace education, I would concur with the theory of Paulo Freire, among other peace educators, that independence and confidence are both crucial for helping students develop the ability to think critically and act with moral courage to work for social change, an essential outcome of peace education... In this light, the Montessori method of allowing students to question and explore becomes particularly essential.”²⁴ By fostering within the child an encounter with God, free to ask questions and rest in the security of God’s love, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd lays a foundation, not for immediately for a multitude of biblical knowledge, but for the demeanor of peace and love given pride of place in the Gospels.

In order to offer an effective peace education within a religious curriculum for a young child, it is therefore crucial that the dignity and the personhood of the child take first place. The child must be considered within his or her developmental plane, not as an object to be taught, but as a person who is forming him or herself based upon what is presented in his or her environment each and every day. As a religious person, the child’s relationship with a God who loves and cares for him or her must be given pride of place.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a program aimed at cultivating wonder and excitement in the youngest child as he or she experiences God. Selected Bible stories are presented (explicitly not “taught”), with the goal of giving each child the space to creatively interact with God, through the materials, and to ponder God’s presence in their lives. By encouraging children to ask their own questions and come to their own realizations about God and their spirituality, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd moves beyond moral education that directly instructs in particular values, to develop in children the capacity for what Paulo Freire calls “moral courage”²⁵—the ability to critically assess and respond to a situation from one’s own being in contrast to acting according to a pre-defined moral compass.

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²⁴ Cheryl Duckworth, “Teaching peace: a dialogue on the Montessori method,” *Journal of Peace Education* 3:1 (March 2006) 40.

²⁵ Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2010).

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