Benjamin S. Stephens
Logsdon Seminary
stephensxscott@gmail.com
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# (UN)TEACHING VIOLENCE:
## Virtue Ethics and Community Moral (Re)Formation

Abstract

The unteaching of violence in our faith communities must begin with some kind of system of education and moral formation. Humans are not naturally peaceful people and any attempt to teach peaceableness would have to be a process of growth and formation. While there are many ways to teach peace and unteach violence, from within Christianity one encounters the virtues as a cornerstone of personal and communal moral formation. With this in mind, a method of unteaching violence can be developed for our communities by drawing from Groome's model of Shared Praxis and MacIntyre's work with the virtues.

## THE VIRTUES: THEORY IN PRAXIS

### The Virtues and Violence in Community

Before anything substantive can be said about how the virtues inform and shape religious education, a solid foundation of their meaning and implications must be set. The virtues are not simply "good things" or "positive attributes", but instead are formative habits which define communities as well as individuals. Conceiving of the virtues as abstract personal characteristics[1] makes a stark break from how the virtues have been understood for the majority of Western history. Describing an act as "virtuous" says little about where it falls on an abstract moral spectrum, but instead about the nature of the person and/or community that has committed such action.

Virtues are not abstract; they find their meaning within shared experiences and practices of a particular community. Morality is not, however, a purely subjective thing, far from it actually. Morality is always connected to the socially local and particular.[2] Possessing the virtues, therefore, means being connected to a tradition and a community; objective morality is always found within a tradition and community. An examination of pre-modern cultures, namely those which Alasdair MacIntyre describes as "heroic," points towards an understanding of virtues as evolving from shared stories/myths. Homeric societies understood humans in light of their actions, what they *did*. The Greek word *aretê* which later comes to be "virtue" is used in Homer's poems to signify excellence of any kind.[3] Characteristics like courage are considered "excellent" because they are directly tied to other characteristics that sustain communities. Thus, virtues are characteristics which served the community before they were embraced by individuals.

That virtues are attached to communities as opposed to individuals spotlights how the "self" of heroic societies and the "self" of modernity are quite different moral concepts. The

[1] This is a commonly held position, enough so that much of Alasdair MacIntyre's work has been to make more explicit what the definition of a virtue actually is.

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 126-7).

[3] Ibid., 122.

modern "self" is able and expected to step outside of its own context and community. Heroic societies would have found it unintelligible to attempt to deal with a moral issue from an "outside" perspective (i.e. the modern concept of "objectivity") because there is no concept of the "outside" at all.[4] To be "outside" is to distance oneself from his/her community and to become a stranger. Alienation and separation are the only possible results from removing oneself from the community for an "outside" perspective.[5] MacIntyre presents ancient Athens as an example for teaching virtues. Athens, according to MacIntyre, teaches us how we become "just or courageous by performing just or courageous acts; we become theoretically or practically wise as a result of systemic instruction … As we transform our initial naturally given dispositions into virtues of character, we do so by gradually coming to exercise those dispositions …"[6] The virtues, then, can only exist within a community wherein they are continually taught and learned. One also finds in Athens community participation and dialogue with a particular story. The interactions of teachers and students dialoguing and learning together shows what it means to be virtuous. Cooperation which must, if it is effective, be coupled with humility.[7]

To practice nonviolence is not about acting nonviolently, doing nonviolent things, or avoiding violence. Instead, it is about being formed in a manner of which wherein to respond to a situation violently is unintelligible.[8] When violence comes to the community, the response is not to also act violently in return; instead the response to violence is transformative which is founded in a disposition towards nonviolence.[9] MacIntyre writes that, "Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways."[10] Communities and individuals must learn to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way. This is not achieved by following rules, but instead by being formed by stories and practices of virtue, namely reconciliation and nonviolence. The nature of nonviolence having to be learned and formed by habits points to it functioning similarly to how Aristotle speaks of moral virtues, i.e., that they are formed by habit and not something which one has by nature.[11]While this may seem to work itself out theoretically, how does it begin to actualize itself in the real world? Paulo Freire poses the problem as such: "How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?"[12] The only real option for those affected by violence is to make the struggle their own, to learn where they are and what is going on, and only then can the process of liberation take place. Violence must be replaced with virtue, namely the virtue of Charity.

## The Virtues and Religious Education

Thomas Aquinas, coming from within the Christian tradition, adds Charity (love) to the list of traditional virtues.[13] Building on this idea of Charity as a "love that does," those of us

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[4] Ibid., 126.

[5] A more recent response to the modern idea of an "outside" perspective can be found in postmodernity's insistence on the return to more local narratives, shifting away from metanarratives. What this holds for moral theory and religious education remains to be seen.

[6] MacIntyre, 154.

[7] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1992), 78-9.

[8] It may be more suitable then to use the term being "practiced" in nonviolence.

[9] Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1103b20-6. All references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* will use Bekker's numbering.

[10] MacIntyre, 149.

[11] *Ethics*, 1103a16-27.

[12] Freire, 33.

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 62, Art. 4, co.

within Christianity find the idea of forgiveness as an alternative response to violence. Aquinas alters how the "good" is understood, because the community which seeks to achieve this "good" must be one of reconciliation.[14] But becoming a community of reconciliation means learning reconciliation, learning to love; this is where religious education comes into the task.

Charity only becomes intelligible within a community by understanding reconciliation and forgiveness. Through remembering our stories, and the fact that we are storied-animals is the answer here.[15] Faith communities need tellers of these stories in order for people to become rightly-storied; this is where religious educators step in. Participation within a community is about learning how one fits within it. While there is definitely a pedagogical nature to this, it must be remembered that being able to know what stories we are part of and learning from them has to be an activity of co-learning. Teacher/students interact with these stories and learn from them together in an effort to humanize both themselves as well as the "other" in their midst.[16]

Religious education is then about reminding us of our stories, as well as how we are to act within those stories. The virtues, being grounded in the life of a community, help us to break down and un-teach individualism, which is itself a force of violence. To try and cut ourselves off from our pasts, to act purely as autonomous individuals, deforms our present relationships and prohibits us from acting.[17] What is the "good" which we seek in our community? How do we point and move towards it? What stories/practices can further our search for the "good?" For Christian religious educators, education is an activity in which we purposefully attend to the movement(s) of God in the community's present experience, the Story of the wider Christian community throughout history, and the Vision of God's kingdom which is already being actualized.[18]

## (UN)TEACHING VIOLENCE

According to Thomas Groome, educational activity is "a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with people to our present, to the past heritage it embodies, and to the future possibility it holds for the total person and community."[19] We critically engage with the past in order to claim our future. Dealing with the past in a way which allows the future to fully become and not just be a shallow repetition of past failings and mistakes. An education that seeks to un-teach violence must begin by reconciling the problem of the teacher-student contradiction. Only when those involved are simultaneously teacher *and* student will those involved be able to interact with violence in a genuine way.[20]

### A Pedagogy of Nonviolence

Drawing extensively from Groome's methodology found in chapter ten of his *Christian Religious Education*,[21] along with a foundation within how MacIntyre posits virtues function within society, one can begin to work out a rough pedagogy of nonviolence. For the sake of

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[14] MacIntyre, 174.

[15] Ibid., 216.

[16] Freire, 62.

[17] MacIntyre, 221.

[18] Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 25.

[19] Ibid., 21.

[20] Freire, 59.

[21] For further reading on the movements see Groome ch. 10, pp. 207-32. The movements are as follows: Naming Present Action, The Participant's Stories and Visions, The Christian Community Story and Vision, Dialectical Hermeneutic Between the Story and Participant's Stories, and Dialectical Hermeneutic Between the Vision and Participant's Visions. Henceforth, the will only be referenced by their numbering in the order described by Groome.

brevity, Aquinas' theological virtue of Charity will be examined as an example of how virtues can be examined and taught within a community as a response to violence.[22]

Groome's first movement would focus on asking praxis-related questions such as, "How do we love in the face of violence in our communities?" or "What does charity look like in a violent world?" By asking praxis related questions, we begin to, as a group involved with the present action (the unlearning/unteaching of violence), describe how we engage with the issue at hand. How do we respond to violence in our communities?[23] The goal is to shift from a *theoria* way of knowing to that of a *praxis* one.[24] It is not enough to talk about ideas; we must focus on actions--what do we *do* instead of what think we *think*. Ultimately, the group must describe their experience with violence as well as how it affects their faith community.

The second movement shifts to a time where those involved in the exercise are encouraged to share what love and charity have meant for them in their own lives in order to produce critical engagement with the answers given during the first movement. Groome simplifies the movement by posing the question, "Why we do what we do and what our hopes are in doing it?"[25] Specifically, then, when we respond to violence with violence, why are we doing it and what are we hoping to get out of it? These questions are not about challenging a perspective, only asking to reflect on it. The aim here is always encouraging and enabling participants to critically engage with their experience (past, present, and future), their reasoning behind it, and the consequences.

The third movement, introduces the participants to how their specific faith tradition has understood love and charity as well as what that understanding means for formation. While the previous movement was about how the community understands charity and love and how violence affects the community, this movement is an opportunity for those involved to begin encountering the Church's Story and the Vision which the Story invites.[26] This is difficult because while one may be able to trace a rhetorical trend throughout the Christian Story concerning violence (the Vision), it seems that the Church has had a difficult time applying it practically. It is here, with an engagement with the Story and Vision, that participation and appropriation begin to happen. This movement is not about handing a bullet-list or point-for-point explanation on how to do things. Personal appropriation hinges on those involved making the Story and Vision their own in their own way.[27]

Moving forward, the fourth movement is where participants begin to critique the Christian story in light of their own, as well as critiquing their stories in light of the Christian story, holding everything together in dialectical tension. Groome suggests asking, though in less metaphorical language, "What does the community's Story mean for (affirm, call in question, invite beyond) our stories, and how do our stories respond to (affirm, recognize limits of, push beyond) the community Story?"[28] As it relates to teaching charity in the face of violence, this is where communities can begin to recognize the violence inherent within the Story/stories and unpack how to engage with their specific contexts oriented towards healing, reconciliation, and

[22] It is worth noting that while Groome's movements are ordered one through five, it is conceivable to go about them in an order other than how he describes them.

[23] While confronting violence on a global scale is important, the focus first has to be the violence in our everyday lives.

[24] Groome, 210.

[25] Ibid., 211.

[26] Ibid., 214.

[27] Cf. *Ethics*, 1104a4-11.

[28] Groome, 217.

growth. We can begin to deal with the violence in our past in an attempt to make for a different future. How can we begin to love God and neighbor while still building our communities around violence?

Finally, the fifth movement is similar in function to the fourth movement, but instead emphasizes the Vision/visions dialectic. This is the time where participants begin to engage with how the present action relates to the Christian community's vision and ask how we are to act in light of the vision itself. This movement may be the most important of them all because it is ultimately what drives praxis forward. If this movement does not take place, a praxis-response may not be reached and the entire enterprise may collapse in on itself. It is not enough to recognize violence in our communities and how it contrasts with virtues such as charity. If we hope to see change, growth, and formation we must begin to be formed morally in a manner where the only way we know to respond to violence is with love.[29] We critique the visions embodied by our present action in the light of the Vision of God's Kingdom, deciding on future action that will be an appropriate response to that Vision.[30] This movement is the "where do we go from here" moment, inviting us to a change, a movement, and a decision, rather than a theory. Sometimes the response is to start the whole process over again, which is completely appropriate. For this movement (as well as the Fourth), the question is never "Do we or do we not respond to violence with love?" Responding to violence with love is a mandate of the Kingdom of God. While some may choose to overlook it, the educator cannot pretend that this is a valid response. We invite others to understand what love *is* and then pose the question of what it looks like in action.[31]

## The Religious Educator and Violent Communities

To bring change to violent communities, religious educators must act politically within time and history. Though some violence may *seem* to exist apolitically, all violence is political because it involves persons bound up in the shared experience of a community. While it is common within Christianity in the United States to envision Christian political activity as voting for a "Christian" candidate or forming a "Christian political party", Christian religious educators must be wary of this understanding of political action. By acting politically, we mean acting in ways that "influence and structurally intervene to influence how people live their lives in society."[32] Part of this political activity is the act of entering into communion with those who are in violent communities, a political shift that can be likened to a "conversion." Education does not occur from the "outside" and as religious educators, we must be willing to abandon our "status" as educators in order to be a part of the process of liberatory education.[33]

So the question must be asked: how do we make a story of peace intelligible within violent communities? How do we make it accessible in a way that people can appropriate it and make it their own? From a Christian perspective, we have to be able to unteach any understanding of salvation that places it "later" or in an otherworldly reality. It must be resituated here and now. Injustice and cycles of violence and destruction are more easily accepted when it is believed that respite from them will only come after this life has ended. For Freire, there is no "way things just are" when it comes to violence in communities.[34] Those affected by violence

[29] Cf. *Ethics*, 1105a17-1105b19.
[30] Groome, 220.
[31] Ibid., 222.
[32] Ibid., 48.
[33] Freire, 47.
[34] Ibid., 34.

must perceive it for what it is: not a closed and fixed reality, but one that can be changed. Only when this realization is made can people begin to change. Such a realization comes with an interaction with a community's shared story, as well as how that story relates to the Christian Story. Tying in with Aristotle and the virtues, the end of education is not an "abstract knowing" but instead a specific kind of moral character that makes for a good member of a community. Only a way of knowing centered on praxis can create this.[35]As Christian religious educators, there is a responsibility to represent Jesus Christ in communities incarnationally. One cannot hope to make a difference if he/she attempts to remain detached from the pain and sorrow around them. Solidarity and cooperation are the only options. Responding to violence is not about making self-replicas, or even replicating a way of doing Christianity. Instead, focus should be on trying to give individuals the tools they need to be like Christ.

## Community Moral (Re)Formation

The difficulty that runs throughout is that both individuals and communities are not blank slates waiting to be filled. Responding to violence is about moral reformation as opposed to simple formation. While communities could get to a place where this process of learning begins during childhood and is nurtured throughout life, as it stands faith communities exist within and are surrounded by violence. Violence has been a shaping characteristic that must be dealt with. The reformation towards nonviolence and love cannot be based upon some kind of thin moralism. The virtues have to be taught and learned.

Writing over thirty years ago, MacIntyre suggested that the modern attempt at conceiving of morality as being disconnected from the local and the communal, from shared practices and stories, had been a colossal failure.[36] Moral theory, and just as importantly the praxis that should come alongside said theory, has to be relocated in the dialectical relationship between people's experiences and the shared experiences of their communities. This is done by, as Groome so clearly puts it, embracing the present action and critically reflecting on it.[37] There is no answer or response to violence found in the realm of abstraction because violence, as a force in the world, is not abstract.

Just as violence is a learned reality,[38] so in the same way nonviolence and peaceableness are and can be learned. But learning nonviolence and peace can be difficult, especially after having spent years, if not decades, being shaped by violence. Muscles, both physical as well as moral, are born, conditioned, and strengthened. It can sometimes take just as long for a person to be reformed as it did for them to be formed in the first place. It is only by grounding the moral muscles that are the virtues in shared praxis that people can begin to truly change. Whether this takes place on the individual or community level, it must ultimately come from the bottom-up. Violence, as an oppressive force in the world, acts from the top-down and responding to it means refusing to act in the same manner. The only freedom from violence comes from people unlearning violence and being morally reformed in a manner wherein to act violently becomes unintelligible. It is only then that the oppressed find themselves freed and only then the oppressors can be freed from their own oppressive nature.[39]

[35] Groome, 156.
[36] MacIntyre, 52.
[37] Groome, 184.
[38] Violence, like anything else, is learned by experiencing and reacting to it.
[39] Freire, 28-9.

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