

RESTORING THE FOUNDATIONS OF REASON AND FAITH IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Contemporary Problem of Religious Education in Catholic Schools

In 1847, the American Protestant theologian, Horace Bushnell, published his classic work, *Christian Nurture*, wherein he alluded with good-natured envy to the success of the catechetical work of the Catholic Church.¹ Indeed, Catholic educational practices have had a long history of effectiveness. At the outset of the twenty-first century, however, it seems that Catholic schools in the western world are substantially failing in their mission to hand on the faith to a new generation.² In Australia, research has chronicled this problem for over twenty years. A 2006 investigation into the attitudes of *Generation Y* found that less than 3% of recent graduates from Catholic schools participated regularly in the Sunday Eucharist while *Relativism* was identified as their predominant philosophy...

Generation Y are what their parents and Australian culture have made them. They have taken strongly to two 'late modern' principles: that an individual's views and preferences, provided they harm no-one else, should not be questioned or constrained, and that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are purely personal life-style choices—in no way necessary.³

In 2010 Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged this problem to journalist Peter Seewald who asked him how it was possible that, despite spending years in Catholic schools, students in the Western world seem to end up knowing more about Buddhism than their own faith. The Pope replied: "That is a question I also ask myself. Every child in Germany has nine to thirteen years of religion in school. Why, in spite of that, so very little sticks, if I may put it like that, is

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¹ See Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1847), p. 25.

² Obviously, it is not the Catholic school alone that nurtures and guides faith, the socializing factors of family and parish need to be kept in mind too.

³ P. Hughes, M. Mason, A. Singleton, R. Webber, *National Study Of The "Spirituality" Of Generation Y* (2006). See website: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/spir/sppub/sppub.htm>

incomprehensible.”⁴ In a discourse to university lecturers in 2007, Pope Benedict had already requested that certain foundational issues be addressed to determining “effective ways of proclaiming the ‘realism’ of faith”.⁵

This paper will explore some of these issues in terms of their impact on the effectiveness of religious education in Catholic schools and suggest possible solutions by applying the insights of John Henry Newman, a writer to whom Benedict XVI has drawn attention for his remarkable insight into modern problems. Part 1 will outline some current challenges for religious education, including the anti-realist educational philosophy of Constructivism and the unhelpful influence of *Recontextualisation* theology. Part 2 will take up the request of Benedict XVI to explore relevant aspects of the work of John Henry Newman with a particular focus on his clarification of the relationship between religious faith and theology. Part 3 will apply some of Newman’s insights directly to the field of religious education and argue for the importance of “certitude” in this context.

Current Challenges for Religious Education

Constructivism – Relativist Epistemology

Since the mid-1980s, Constructivism has held an unassailable place in the educational establishment of the western world. A search for this term in documents from education faculties will reveal the extent of its dominance, as this sample from major English speaking universities indicates.

Country	University	Number of Results
U.S.A.	Harvard University (Cambridge MS) ⁶	4,560
Canada	University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon) ⁷	659
U.K.	University of Glasgow (Glasgow) ⁸	299
Australia	Monash University (Melbourne) ⁹	241
New Zealand	University of Canterbury (Christchurch) ¹⁰	370

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Michael J. Miller and Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 140.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Address to Participants in the First European Meeting of University Lecturers* (June 23, 2007).

⁶ http://www.gse.harvard.edu/search/index.html?cx=016446603697163608362%3Aurqj_p1s5to&q=constructivism&sa=Search&cof=FORID%3A11&siteurl=www.gse.harvard.edu%2Fcontact (accessed Dec 27, 2011).

⁷ <http://www.usask.ca/search/?q=constructivism&gosearch1=Search> (accessed Dec 27, 2011).

⁸ <http://www.gla.ac.uk/search/results/index.html?cx=017623854272262319862%3Alvn9vifcf38&cof=FORID%3A10&ie=UTF-8&q=constructivism&ssSubmit=search> (accessed Dec 27, 2011).

⁹ <http://search.monash.edu/?cx=001621737867968046729%3Ansl4i5alcty&cof=FORID%3A11&q=constructivism&sa=Find> (accessed Dec 27, 2011).

¹⁰ <http://ucgoogle1.canterbury.ac.nz/search?q=constructivism&sb=Search> (accessed Dec 27, 2011).

A definition of *Constructivism* in its radical form will typically contrast the active role of learners in constructing knowledge for themselves with a so-called passive alternative, whereby truth is held to exist independently and is presented to the learner and confirmed by the authority of some external source. In the words of its chief theorist, Ernst von Glasersfeld: “knowledge is the result of an individual subject’s constructive activity, not a commodity that somehow resides outside the knower and can be conveyed or instilled by diligent perception or linguistic communication.”¹¹ Essentially, this is the position of Kant – human knowledge cannot be identified with external reality, but refers only to our own experience. Other philosophers, including Richard Rorty, go further and insist that truth does not exist and our perceptions must be continually renegotiated in a social context. In his own words: “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”¹² These ideas constitute a challenge for religious education, as they tend to undermine the Catholic Church’s claim that human beings live in an intelligible universe created by God.

Nevertheless, *Constructivism* is a term with many meanings. Its claims are so broad that there are some aspects of the theory on which almost any educationalist can agree. Radical constructivists acknowledge this difficulty with definitions as evidenced by von Glasersfeld:

A few years ago when the term Constructivism became fashionable and was adopted by people who had no intention of changing their epistemological orientation, I introduced the term trivial constructivism. My intent was to distinguish this fashion from the ‘radical’ movement that broke with the tradition of cognitive representation.¹³

The tradition to which Glasersfeld is referring is the philosophy of realism – the view that reality exists beyond the individual. The epistemology of Thomas Aquinas and the educational theory of Maria Montessori take this view, which puts them in a perplexing position for many constructivists. Both agree that the human being actively constructs knowledge, but each one does so using the kind of real external data whose validity the radical constructivists reject. While the philosophical origins of Constructivism can be found in the likes of Kant and Rorty, its educational pedigree includes the names of Piaget, Vygot-

¹¹ E. von Glasersfeld, “Environment and Education,” in L. P. Steffe, T. Wood (eds.), *Transforming Children’s Mathematics Education: International Perspectives* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), p. 37.

¹² R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 170.

¹³ E. von Glasersfeld, “Questions and Answers About Radical Constructivism,” in M. K. Pearsall (ed.), *Scope, Sequence, and Coordination of Secondary Schools Science*, Vol. 11, *Relevant Research* (Washington DC: NSTA, 1992), p. 170.

sky and Dewey, all of whom rejected an objectivist view of knowledge and the possibility of attaining truth as it actually exists.¹⁴

It is not just traditional Catholicism which has difficulties with radical constructivism. Challenges from other educational researchers have grown significantly in recent years. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the typical constructivist teaching – inquiry or problem-based learning strategies – when used for students working with new or complex material.¹⁵ Clark (1989) noted that even when students express preference for constructivist methods, they do not learn as effectively as they would from direct instruction.¹⁶ Lundeberg (1987) and Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) indicated that mastery of a variety of learning strategies – not just constructivist ones – was necessary for developing expertise across different domains.¹⁷ Samuelstuen and Braten (2007) confirmed that students benefit more from using a variety of learning approaches.¹⁸ Small (2003) identified the fallacy of constructivist epistemology and pointed to the unhelpful confusion between the legitimate and well established learning process (by which human beings construct knowledge by relating component parts) and the teaching strategy of Constructivism.¹⁹ Phillips (1995) concluded that the issue should be considered from the learner's perspective. The construction of knowledge by an individual benefits more from direct instruction and does not need inquiry methods to achieve the best result.²⁰ John Hattie, the world's most cited educational researcher, expresses the frustration of those who have pointed out the shortcomings of radical constructivism.

Every year I present lectures to teacher education students and find that they are already indoctrinated with the mantra "constructivism good, direct instruction bad". When I show them the results of these meta-analyses, they are stunned, and

¹⁴ For a brief and accurate description of Constructivism, see G. Kanselaar, *Constructivism and socio-constructivism* (University of Utrecht: Open Access, 2002).

¹⁵ See P. A. Kirschner, J. Sweller, 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): pp. 75-86.

¹⁶ See R. E. Clark, "When teaching kills learning: Research on mathematics," in H. M. Mandl, N. Bennett, E. de Corte, H. F. Friedrich (eds.), *Learning and instruction: European research in an international*, vol. 2 (London: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 1-22.

¹⁷ See M. A. Lundeberg, "Metacognitive aspects of reading comprehension: Studying understanding in legal case analysis," *Reading Research Quarterly* 61 (1): pp. 94-106.

¹⁸ See M. S. Samuelstuen, I. Braten, "Examining the validity of self-reports on scales measuring students' strategic processing," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77 (2007 no. 2): pp. 351-378.

¹⁹ See R. Small, "A fallacy in constructivist epistemology," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37 (2003 no. 3): pp. 483-502.

²⁰ N. B. Phillips, C. L. Hamlett, L. S. Fuchs, D. Fuchs, "Combining classwide curriculum-based measurement and peer tutoring to help general educators provide adaptive education," *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 8 (1995 no. 3): pp. 148-156.

they often become angry at having been given an agreed set of truths and commandments against direct instruction.²¹

Evidence of Constructivism in Catholic Education

With such compelling reasons to be wary of radical constructivism, one might expect Catholic schools to avoid it and adopt a philosophy more suited to their tradition. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Many teachers and principals in Catholic schools have themselves taken a relativist stance towards religious truth, asserting that individuals must make up their own minds about which doctrines of the Church will be personally accepted. This view is verified by research from McLaughlin and others. In a sample of Australian Catholic school principals, he found that they:

... had a practical tolerant view of Catholicism that was more about establishing relationships through service and less on law. All principals privately held views contrary to current Vatican teachings on priestly celibacy, married clergy, female priesthood and artificial birth control.²²

McLaughlin also investigated the attitudes of students at Australian Catholic University, confirming the trend:

Likewise, student teachers held contrary positions to the official church teachings and discipline in the areas of female clerics, optional clerical celibacy and a preference for married clergy. This research confirms a trend identified in other research (Hewitt, 1978), that increasingly, young Australian Catholics are becoming 'communal Catholics.' They are 'loyal to the Catholic collectivity and sympathetic toward its heritage' (Ludwig, 1995), but refuse unilaterally to acknowledge the authority of institutional Church leadership (Greeley, 1978).²³

The combination of a teaching staff who in large part fail to account for the incompatibility of Constructivism with Catholic faith and a relativist culture affecting the parents who constitute the school communities make the results now evident in Catholic schools unsurprising. It must now be asked: what can be done to correct the situation? One possible response is to assert that there is no problem...

This evolving 'selective' approach of affiliation with Catholicism is not a cynical response. Along with it, is an eschewing of the hypocritical and a yearning for increased authenticity (Flynn, 1993), "a desire for new religious forms... which provide personalised experiences of community" (Colman, 1982), as well as an

²¹ John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis Of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating To Achievement* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 204.

²² D. McLaughlin, *Catholic school lay principals: Professional and pastoral issues* (Brisbane: Australian Catholic University, 1996), p. 134.

²³ D. McLaughlin, *The Beliefs, Values and Practices of Student Teachers at the Australian Catholic University* (Research Report. Australian Catholic University, 1999).

increased involvement in social justice issues (Goosen, 1990; Neidhart and Hansford, 1988).²⁴

This view is supported by *Recontextualisation* theologians at the Belgian Catholic University of Leuven. One leading Leuven theologian, Lieven Boeve, has even called for a diminishing of the role of the Christian narrative:

In the post-modern context, Christianity as a master narrative has also lost much of its credibility – in spite of the fact that many see the fall of the modern master narratives as an opportunity for narrating a new Christian master narrative. Christianity, however, has no future as an all-encompassing meta-narrative, but only as a small narrative, or better still as an open narrative, as a narrative that offers orientation and integration without thereby being determined to integrate everything in its own narrative in a totalitarian way.²⁵

Boeve's Leuven colleague, Didier Pollefeyt, has spelled out the implications of this approach for Catholic schools:²⁶

The end product of Catholic education is... a pupil who is able to inquire [into] everything and everyone positively and with an open mind, inspired by a profound sense of humanity and by a connection with old and new stories which can open alternative worlds which can grant the future a utopian orientation...²⁷

In the context of a pluralist society, the Catholic student is advised to abandon the Gospel claim of Christ: "No one comes to the Father except through me."²⁸ Pollefeyt's Catholic pupil has only an open mind, an understanding of his or her own humanity and a connection with old and new stories. This definition simply provides an accurate description of a rational human being of no particular religious persuasion. The views of Boeve and Pollefeyt are clearly at odds with those committed to the mandate of the Great Commission (Mark 16:15-16) including Benedict XVI:

... the Church knows only *one* tradition: the tradition of Jesus, who lives his life from the Father and who receives himself from the Father and continually gives himself back to the Father. From this perspective, the Church is... critical of all other traditions, for it is from this perspective that the phenomenon known as 'original sin' – that is, the antihuman element of all traditions – makes itself known not just as a statistical but also as a fundamental fact.²⁹

²⁴ *Id.*, p. 32.

²⁵ Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, trans. Brian Doyle (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), p. 175.

²⁶ See D. Pollefeyt, J. Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an educational institute," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2 (2010 no. 2).

²⁷ Didier Pollefeyt, *Towards a Contemporary Identity for the Catholic School* (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 2006). See <http://www.motherteresa.catholic.edu.au/learning-and-teaching/> (accessed 7 January 2012).

²⁸ John 14:6.

²⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 93.

Newman's Synthesis of Faith and Reason

Thinking With Assent

From a Catholic standpoint, it is untenable to suggest that current difficulties in religious education can be solved by abandoning essential Catholic claims. Yet the challenge remains – how can the dimension of faith be integrated into the learning process without violating the integrity of reason itself? Before his election as pope, Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out that believing is essentially "thinking with assent."³⁰ The act of faith comes about in a different way from the act of knowing:

... not through the degree of evidence bringing the process of thought to its conclusion, but by an act of will, in connection with which the thought process remains open and still under way. Here, the degree of evidence does not turn the thought into assent; rather the will commands assent, even though the thought process is still under way.³¹

Ratzinger recognised the difficulties in this approach, and acknowledged the accusations of Jaspers and Heidegger that faith, by pre-supposing the answers, leaves no room for questions.³² In answer, Ratzinger cited Pascal's observation: "The heart has its reasons that reason does not know". He noted that we are able to give the assent of faith not because of the depth of our own inquiries or the quality of our evidence, but:

... because the will – the heart – has been touched by God, affected by him. Through being touched in this way, the will knows that even what is not clear to the reason is true. Assent is produced by the will, not by the understanding's own direct insight: the particular kind of freedom of choice involved in the decision of faith rests on this... The will (the heart), therefore, lights the way for the understanding and draws it with it into assent.³³

As part of his reading of the "signs of the times", Benedict XVI has drawn attention to the contribution in this field of the nineteenth century English Cardinal, John Henry Newman, who foresaw many of the problems of modern rationalism and proposed perceptive solutions. Benedict has called for a deeper study of Newman's insights, with a view to applying them to current problems: "I am certain that he still has much to teach us about Christian living and witness amid the challenges of today's world, challenges which he foresaw with such remarkable clarity."³⁴ Pope John Paul II had also expressed admiration for the way in which Newman confronted the issues of rationalism and fideism – challenges with pertinent similarities to those of our own time.

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), p. 21.

³¹ *Id.*, p. 23.

³² *Id.*, p. 20.

³³ *Id.*, pp. 23-25.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Farewell Ceremony Address*, International Airport of Birmingham (19 September 2010).

Rationalism brought with it a rejection of both authority and transcendence, while Fideism turned from the challenges of history and the tasks of this world to a distorted dependence upon authority and the supernatural. In such a world, Newman came to a remarkable synthesis of faith and reason.³⁵

Indeed, Newman's own century had seen traditional religious belief attacked by subjectivist philosophers like Kant, Feuerbach and on another level, Schleiermacher. These speculations attempted to undermine the possibility of any philosophical support for "revealed truth." It was against this background that the First Vatican Council (1870) taught that human beings are capable of knowing God by the light of reason alone.³⁶ This teaching is upheld in the 1993 *Catechism* which offers the added insight that "without this capacity, man would not be able to welcome God's revelation."³⁷ The position is further clarified thus:

In the historical conditions in which he finds himself, however, man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone... So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful.³⁸

The Catholic Church also teaches that the supernatural virtue of faith creates a capacity for belief that is otherwise inaccessible. In *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II reiterated this claim:

Based upon God's testimony and enjoying the supernatural assistance of grace, faith is of an order other than philosophical knowledge which depends upon sense perception and experience and which advances by the light of the intellect alone... Philosophy and the sciences function within the order of natural reason; while faith, enlightened and guided by the Spirit, recognizes in the message of salvation the "fullness of grace and truth" (cf. Jn 1: 14) which God has willed to reveal in history and definitively through his Son, Jesus Christ...³⁹

In other words, human beings arrive at the truth about God using the supernatural gift of faith together with their natural capacity for reason – not *either* but *both*.

Categories of Assent

Newman's writings touching on these issues can be found in his classic work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, in which he offers a sophisticated investigation of the process of assent, describing three mental acts associated with the holding of propositions of any kind – doubt, inference and assent. All three, he insisted, are appropriate human behaviour.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to Archbishop Vincent Nichols on the Occasion of the Second Centenary of the Birth of Newman* (22 January 2001). Cf. also *Fides et Ratio*, 74.

³⁶ See Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius* 2: DS 3004.

³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Sydney: St Pauls/ Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994), p. 36.

³⁸ *Id.*, p. 37.

³⁹ *Fides et Ratio*, 9.

We do but fulfill our nature in doubting, inferring and assenting; and our duty is not to abstain from the exercise of any function of our nature, but to do what is in itself right rightly.⁴⁰

Newman identified six different kinds of “assent” which can be helpful in clarifying the relationship between faith and reason in religious education. His primary distinction is between “notional assent” (given to abstract propositions) and “real assent” (given to concrete objects of direct experience).

Notional Assent

Newman described five kinds of notional assent: profession, credence, opinion, presumption and speculation. Profession is an assent so feeble that it barely rises above the level of assertion. It involves little thought or reflection – such as a decision to follow a fashion or to accept information from an advertisement.⁴¹ Credence is a step beyond this, and expresses the fact that a person has no doubt about a proposition. It is readily given to information taken in by our senses or from books and results in spontaneous assent.⁴² In describing credence, Newman notes that theology is essentially notional, whereas religion should be real.⁴³

Newman then describes opinion. Whereas credence is held to be true, opinion is “probably” true. An opinion is held independently of premises, because human beings claim the right to think whatever they wish, whether or not they have good reasons.⁴⁴ Presumption is the kind of assent given to first principles – those propositions with which reasoning starts. While not as strong as real assent, presumption is a very strong kind of notional assent, drawn from our consciousness of self. Finally, there is speculation – a mental awareness of the reasoning process itself. This is attained by contemplating acts of *mental* reasoning and their results, as distinct from the assent derived from experience or the senses.⁴⁵ An awareness of the legitimate role of speculation has implications for religious education. Newman made it clear in his observations about credence that religion is primarily about the real and theology is essentially notional.

⁴⁰ J. H. Newman, *An Essay In Aid Of A Grammar Of Assent* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1973, first published: 1870), p. 7.

⁴¹ See *id.*, p. 42.

⁴² *Id.*, p. 55.

⁴³ *Id.*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Id.*, p. 58.

⁴⁵ See *id.*, p. 74.

Real Assent

Real assent occurs when the mind is directed towards things, represented by the impressions they have left on the imagination.⁴⁶ Newman noted that the Catholic practice of meditation on the Scriptures permits the believer to encounter a God who speaks of things, not notions: “the facts which they relate stand out before our minds as objects such as may be appropriated by a faith as living as the imagination which apprehends them.”⁴⁷ In company with Thomas Aquinas and Maria Montessori, Newman affirms that “the concrete” is more likely to affect human nature than the abstract.⁴⁸ The implications for religious education and catechesis are obvious. If students are to commit to the Faith as their own, they must be offered the real and the concrete prior to abstract propositions. Instruction in the Catholic faith which confines itself to intellectual dimensions will have very limited appeal. Moreover, Newman claimed that real assents are what make individual human beings unique, for these have a personal character. The particular experiences that each one has are what constitutes every human being's unique condition in history and form the data of an unrepeatable personality.⁴⁹

Applying Newman's Insights to Religious Education

The Stance of the Religious Education Class

According to Newman, in the case of revealed religion, the way in which one holds certain propositions distinguishes the presence or absence of faith itself. To take up a position of doubt makes one a sceptic. To hold propositions as conditional (inference) indicates the position of the philosopher. To offer unconditional acceptance (assent) is to be a believer. What are the implications of these positions for religious education? Obviously, different strategies are required depending on the status of the students. Some will be baptised believers who, according to the *Catechism*, have received the theological virtue of faith in baptism.⁵⁰ There may be others in the class who have not received this gift and are therefore in the position of “philosophers,” needing convincing reasons for belief while awaiting the conferral of the gift of faith. To paraphrase St Augustine, before receiving the gift of faith, one must understand in order to believe; after receiving faith, one must believe in order to understand.⁵¹ The

⁴⁶ See *id.*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *Id.*, p. 79.

⁴⁸ See *id.*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ See *id.*, p. 86.

⁵⁰ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Sydney: St Pauls/ Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994), p. 1266.

⁵¹ *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Tractate XXIX on John 7:14-18, §6.

third stance, scepticism, would be a logical absurdity in a Catholic religious education class, since it would be a deliberate undermining of its purpose.

Inquiry or Investigation?

Newman makes a comment of particular relevance to the inquiry approach favoured by radical constructivism. He distinguishes between inquiry and investigation, insisting that inquiry into revealed truth is inconsistent with faith. One who inquires is in doubt about where the truth lies, hence a believer cannot, at the same time, be an inquirer.

Thus it is sometimes spoken of as a hardship that a Catholic is not allowed to inquire into the truth of his creed; of course he cannot, if he would retain the name of believer. He cannot be both inside and outside of the Church at once. It is merely common sense to tell him that, if he is seeking, he has not found. If seeking includes doubting, and doubting excludes believing, then the Catholic who sets about inquiring thereby declares that he is not a Catholic. He has already lost faith.⁵²

While closing the door of believers to inquiry in matters of faith, Newman was no advocate of fideism or anti-intellectualism. He simply made a distinction between the way in which believers and non-believers engage with the data of revelation:

... inquiry implies doubt and investigation does not imply it; and that those who assent to a doctrine or fact may without inconsistency investigate its credibility, though they cannot literally inquire about its truth... in the case of educated minds, investigations into the argumentative proof of the things to which they have given their assent is an obligation or rather a necessity.⁵³

The Real and the Notional in the Religious Education Class

As noted already in his description of credence, Newman claimed that religion must be based on real assent, while theology is essentially notional; theology builds on the foundation of an existing faith. Both aspects should receive attention in the religious education class, with the balance of this emphasis depending on the needs of individual students. Those with little knowledge or experience of Catholic faith should be offered more concrete experiences to which they can offer real assent. Some contemporary programmes have made the mistake of attempting to meet the needs of older students by confining their religious education presentation to the notional sphere without regard to the students' individual situations. To put it in Newman's terms: in cases where the students lack a sufficient religious foundation, theology has replaced religion rather than supporting it. Those more firmly established in their faith could be offered a developmentally appropriate level of theological investigation, although a degree of caution needs to be exercised here too.

⁵² J. H. Newman, *An Essay In Aid...*, p. 191.

⁵³ *Id.*, p. 192.

Speculative Theology in the Religious Education Class

It is possible and indeed helpful to engage in speculation based on a foundation of faith in real things; this is merely an application of St Anselm's definition of theology – "faith seeking understanding." Yet speculation cannot cause faith; this is a gift. Moreover, there exists the possibility that speculation may overwhelm and destroy faith if one chooses to give more credence to one's own reasoning than to the gift of God. There are numerous examples of theologians who have in this way abandoned faith. If inexperienced students are exposed too soon to speculative theology which does not rest on a foundation of real faith, there is a risk that they will mistake speculation for faith, and claim the right to be arbiters of revealed truth. Their training in constructivist methodology and scientific method will certainly pressure them to act in this way. Newman discouraged those who were intellectually ill-equipped for assessing subtle arguments from placing themselves in danger by deliberate exposure to them.

[Some] who, though they be weak in faith... put themselves in the way of losing it by unnecessarily listening to objections. Moreover, there are minds, undoubtedly, with whom at all times to question a truth is to make it questionable, and to investigate is equivalent to inquiring; and again, there may be beliefs so sacred or so delicate that, if I may use the metaphor, they will not wash without shrinking and losing colour.⁵⁴

Religion as a Cultural Study

In many "post-Christian" jurisdictions, the Church has been conceded the opportunity of presenting its teachings as a body of cultural knowledge, isolated from the actual sacramental and affective devotions that contribute to its life and power. On one level, this seems attractive – an opportunity for evangelisation. In practice, the results have not been encouraging. Students are positioned to take the stance of "philosopher," subjecting the faith to the processes of constructivist inquiry. As Newman demonstrated, this undermines rather than enhances faith. Students have the impression that they understand what Christianity has to offer without experiencing its affective power; the mind is informed but the heart is left untouched. The aspect of "wonder" is neutralised and students are "inoculated" against future interest in Christianity.

The Role of the Church in Relation to Belief.

Newman's view on the role of the Church regarding the content of faith is also relevant for religious educators. He would not have conceded legitimacy to McLaughlin's negotiating believers and insisted that part of the Church's role was to identify opinions that are incompatible with the truth received from

⁵⁴ Id., p. 192.

God.⁵⁵ Catholics need to trust the Church in its doctrinal and moral teaching, even if one does not comprehend the reasons: “Even what he cannot understand he can believe to be true; and he believes it to be true because he believes in the Church.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, he insists that one does not immediately need to know or understand the meaning of every doctrinal proposition the Church teaches. Catholics believe on the authority of the Church, which is deemed to be the authority of Christ himself:

... every Catholic, according to his intellectual capacity, supplements the shortcomings of his knowledge without blunting his real assent to what is elementary, and takes upon himself from the first the whole truth of revelation, progressing from one apprehension of it to another according to his opportunities of doing so.⁵⁷

The Place and Value of Certitude in Religious Education

Pope Benedict XVI has often referred to the prevalence of relativism in modern culture. The influence of Constructivism in reinforcing this mental habit has already been noted. Another tendency, perhaps more general, is the application of the scientific method to religion. The scientific method proceeds by way of hypothesis and empirical experimentation – an entirely appropriate means for establishing material facts. By definition, however, such an approach excludes the spiritual dimension. Will a prayer for rain always produce the same results? Can the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ be tested? Some realities are known only by faith. This leads to a legitimate question. Is human access to the truth or to any kind of certitude possible at all? In science, the answer is no – a hypothesis is always held to be conditional, dependent on further experimental data.

With religious faith, however, certitude is indispensable and Newman has provided a suite of persuasive arguments. He defined certitude as: “the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth... as expressed in the phrase ‘I know that I know’.”⁵⁸ Newman acknowledged that human perceptions change but it does not follow that access to unchangeable truth is impossible: “What is true is always true and cannot fail whereas what is once known need not always be known and is capable of failing.”⁵⁹ For Newman, religion requires more than assent to truth, since it is more than an intellectual acceptance of an argument. Religious faith requires certitude and this must include a principle of persistence: “Without certitude in religious faith... there can be no habit of prayer, no directness of devotion, no intercourse with the unseen, no generosity of self-

⁵⁵ See *id.*, p. 149.

⁵⁶ *Id.*, p. 150.

⁵⁷ *Id.*, p. 153.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, p. 197.

⁵⁹ *Id.*, p. 197.

sacrifice.”⁶⁰ Newman acknowledged that some of his remarks seemed to go against the proper functioning of the human mind which acquires understanding largely through sense experience and by relating these experiences to one another.⁶¹ Yet he insists that relentless introspection using our intellectual processes actually tends to weaken them. Should this become a habit, it will cause the mind to abandon even the most rudimentary assents in favour of a paralysing uncertainty.

“And thus, even those things which it may be absurd to doubt, we may, in consequence of some past suggestion of the possibility of error... [be] hampered with involuntary questionings, as if we were *not* certain when we *are*.”⁶²

A process whereby every religious belief is subjected to “critical” thinking – perhaps more accurately described as systematic doubting – and a demand for empirical proof will undermine religious education just as surely as it will undermine any other intellectual discipline. If the same process were applied to science, the scientific method itself would be undermined by endless questioning. For example, how do we know that the published results in scientific journals are not fraudulent? How can we be certain that the results from an experiment have been accurately reported? If in the field of science we must trust in some basic certitudes, why is this unacceptable for religious faith? Newman acknowledged that a host of imponderable questions which challenge the doctrines of faith must arise in every thoughtful mind. If, however, reason is unable to resolve the dilemma created, then such questions

... must be deliberately put aside, as beyond reason, as no-thoroughfares, which, having no outlet themselves, have no legitimate power to divert us from the King’s highway... A serious obstruction they will be now and then to particular minds, enfeebling the faith which they cannot destroy...⁶³

Newman accepted the possibility that certitudes in any individual may turn out to be mistaken. Yet, if one were to refuse to act unless absolutely certain, the result would be paralysis. The human mind is incapable of infallibly perceiving the difference between real certitudes and apparent ones. It is the Church, under divine guidance, which is charged with this task, not individuals. In his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, he laid down conditions for what would constitute due consideration and these have found their way into settled Catholic teaching.⁶⁴ There may be times when the Church seeks to weigh argu-

⁶⁰ Id., p. 220.

⁶¹ Id., p. 216.

⁶² Id., p. 217.

⁶³ Id., p. 218.

⁶⁴ See J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), pp. 171-203.

ments for and against particular doctrines. Once the matter has been settled, the faithful are called on to simply accept the conclusion as a certitude

... it is our duty deliberately to take things for granted which our forefathers had a duty to doubt about; and unless we summarily put down disputation on points which have been already proved and ruled, we shall waste our time and make no advances.⁶⁵

The case for resting in such certitudes must be put clearly to students and argued in the face of its constructivist alternatives which are far from incontestable.

Conclusions

In the current educational climate, religious education methodologies in many parts of the world have succumbed to pressure from Constructivism and the scientific method, despite the fact that Constructivism is contested by a large body of evidence and scientific method is demonstrably unsuited to religious questions. Persuasive intellectual arguments in support of faith have been offered by popes and Catholic scholars, especially John Henry Newman. As demonstrated by Newman and confirmed by an overwhelming weight of evidence, human beings relate better to concrete forms than abstract ones, and so as far as possible, encounters with concrete realities should precede propositional formulations and any kind of speculative theology. Both real and notional assents (faith and reason) are necessary for sustaining Catholic faith, but the starting point must always heavily favour the real. Sacraments, liturgy and the concrete approaches to religious education pioneered by Maria Montessori, Sofia Cavalletti and their collaborators give the best hope for the practical and educationally sound renewal of religious education and catechesis in our times.⁶⁶

RESTORING THE FOUNDATIONS OF REASON AND FAITH IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SUMMARY

This paper explores reasons for the apparent ineffectiveness of religious education programmes in the Catholic schools of the West. It examines the impact of the anti-realist educational philosophy of Constructivism and the inadequacy of responses to these challenges, including those proposed by *Recontextualisation* theologians. The paper examines the work of the nineteenth century English Cardinal, John Henry Newman, and recommends possible solutions to the crisis in religious education based on the work of his insights. It also argues the case for certitude as a necessary component of religious education.

⁶⁵ Id., p. 229.

⁶⁶ It is not possible to give details of this approach in the current paper, but another article taking up this task is already in preparation.

KEYWORDS: reason, faith, religious education, John H. Newman.