

Essay

# Religious Education beyond Congregational Settings

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**Abstract:** Religious educational literature in the United States often presumes the congregation as the primary context for the work of faith formation. Given the reduction of institutional affiliation and participation in Christian congregations, this assumption makes approaches to religious education requiring an identity-bearing community of affiliation less relevant. Several emerging models of religious education eschew the community provided by formal religious institutions for more provisional, radically contextualized communal approaches to religious education. These approaches spark a different and important imagination for religious education beyond congregations, embedded in provisional communities of solidarity and engagement.

**Keywords:** congregational formation; religious education; institutional affiliation

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## 1. Introduction

For a period of about five years, I did not teach an introductory class in religious education. Teaching the introductory class introduced a basic clash of realities that I could not resolve well in a ten-week term. Namely, the majority of the US literature about religious education presumes participation in a congregational setting that has some relevance to the formation of identity and commitments. The majority of European literature about religious education presumes a schooling setting with required religious education classes, even though a shared community of religious belief is not assumed. Neither situation was relevant to well over half of the students in any given introductory class in my teaching context in a school of theology.

Many of the students in my classes were planning to work as chaplains in hospital or hospice settings, where they would not be a part of a formative religious community, since they would be working short-term with more crisis-oriented populations. Others were planning to work in religiously based nonprofits with a highly mobile client base and small professional staffs who engage the work for a variety of reasons, not all of them religious. Even those who were working in parishes knew that they would only see the bulk of their parishioners once a month for two hours or less, given church attendance statistics in this part of the United States. For example, in Colorado, according to the Pew Religious Landscapes Data from 2015, the religiously unaffiliated is a larger group (29%) than Catholics (23%), evangelicals (22%), or mainline Protestants (15%). Among adults in the state, 38% never attend religious services and only 26% attend religious educational or prayer groups on a weekly or monthly basis (Pew 2015). Although the Pew data do not go into this much detail, given the affiliation numbers and patterns of piety in denominational identity, most of those attendees are more likely to be in Roman Catholic and Evangelical congregations than in the congregations of mainline Protestants that make up the majority of our student body. I should also note that the second highest religious affiliation group in my seminary is “none”.

While I can help these students to make connections between their vocational contexts and the academic literature of Christian religious education in the United States, this massive translation project ends up being a different topic entirely. This literature often imagines religious education as a critically formative task in the Christian faith, where a vital congregation serves as a significant

community of shared identity and practice for participants. Although there is a great deal of religious educational literature from places like the Netherlands, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany that considers the task of religious education from the context of civic or academic school-based classroom learning, in the United States, the history of separation of church and state and the deep concerns about what kind of religion would be taught in schools if introduced as an academic topic means that such a religious educational project has almost no leverage in the imagination of students in my classes. Thus, I avoided trying to introduce the topic of religious education as an academic subject until I could figure out how to approach it in a way that made sense to my students in the current context.

This experience in finding my field largely irrelevant to my students raised the major question: What does religious education look like in the United States without the presumption of belonging to an established community of faith? I am not a secularization theory proponent, given the continued importance of religious and spiritual discourse and practice in the United States. Institutions are built to endure, and some forms of institutionalized Christian community will endure in the United States for a long while. However, I do not believe that they will have the same central location of social and formative importance that they had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States. Some may rightfully argue that they never had this kind of importance, and that harkening back to a time when churches had more cultural influence is nostalgia, plain and simple. But the stack of basketball trophies from the mid-twentieth century in the basement of my Denver mainline protestant congregation indicates something different. For social interaction, athletics, life cycle and significant ritual occasions, and community gatherings, the church was the only game in town in many communities for a long time. This is no longer the case, and the strategy of voluntary religious schooling or socialization into institutional Christian communities similarly no longer holds as a strongly viable approach to religious education.

The diminished location of Christian institutions in the social structures of US white middle-class Christianity is often expressed in concerns about the failure to protect Sunday mornings for congregational participation. Given the rush of schedules created by households in which there are no nonworking adults, other family activities and household tasks end up crammed into weekend hours on both days. Some years back, as a volunteer Sunday school teacher, I had a family who declared that this year, they had made a commitment to “do Sunday school” for their four- and six-year-old daughters. It was clear that this was a choice among many enrichment activities for their children and, after one academic year commitment, they chose something different to do on Sunday mornings the next year. It was hard to wrap my head around the idea that someone would treat the faith community as the same as any other enrichment opportunity for their child, important enough in some ways to make a one-year commitment, but largely interchangeable among many other important commitments to their growth and development. When we talked with the parents about the life of the whole community being essential to their own growth in faith through worship, service, and community relationships, they seemed puzzled by this, as if we had asked them to commit themselves fully to the personal development offered by the soccer boosters organization. The church just was not that important to them, even though they sought some cultural familiarity with the Christian tradition and perhaps moral formation for their children through their participation in religious education classes for the year.

When I speak to committed Christians of the grandparent generation about their adult children, they often express sadness that their children are not involved in a community of faith. They took their children to church regularly and they tried to emulate Christian values in their home, and yet their children have no interest in belonging to the institutional church. They often feel ashamed that they have failed to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation. However, if you ask these same parents about their adult children: Do you believe they are good people living lives indicative of the values in which you raised them? They will provide a litany of how proud they are of their children, how their work reflects concern for those who have experienced injustice, and how their children have taught

their grandchildren to be compassionate and wise in ways that they never felt they managed with their own children at that age. When I think of the dozens of conversations I have had like this over the past decade, I ask two questions. First, have these parents truly failed to pass on their faith when they admire the deepest values that their children have taken from their upbringing? If they admire the way that their children are living their lives and have a sense of integrity about their practices and commitments, should there be concern about whether or not they are members of a congregation? Second, why is membership in a formal Christian community the most obvious marker for whether or not they have successfully taught the next generation the Christian faith? In some cases, the next generation has also jettisoned any notion of God, Christian belief, or other markers of Christian identity. In other cases, many of these identity-bearing beliefs are present, just not a felt need to participate in a formal Christian community.

It feels like a professional betrayal to the church to even ask the question of whether Christian religious education can happen without participation in a formal Christian community. Many scholars in my academic fields of religious education and practical theology count the support and upbuilding of the church as one of the reasons for their existence. Therefore, to ask the question of how important a community of faith is to the task of religious education is almost unthinkable. The religious education texts that I used to teach as basic to the field, such as Maria Harris' *Fashion Me a People*, Anne Wimberly's *Soul Stories*, Charles Foster's *Educating Congregations*, and Thomas Groome's *Christian Religious Education*, all presume the existence of a community of faith that has identity bearing weight and some level of moral authority for its participants (or at least a Catholic schooling setting where the church tradition is authoritative) (Harris 1989; Wimberly 2005; Foster 1994; Groome 1980). If communities of faith did not engage in religious education in the United States, who would? Does the notion of "religious education" make any sense at all without formal congregations?

## 2. The Prominence of the Congregation in US Religious Educational Literature

Participation in a Christian community offers some things that are hard to imagine being a Christian without, such as access to communal worship and sacramental life. For example, John Wesley, one of the founders of the movement that led to the development of my own denomination, grew worried when the class meetings he had invented were taking off in popularity and people ceased to attend daily or weekly Eucharist in Anglican parishes. He feared for the health of the souls of parishioners who did not experience these means of grace on a regular basis. For many expressions of Christian discipleship, gathering together with the faithful for worship is an essential element of formation, and congregations are the presumed context for that experience.

Additionally, developmental theory claims that the way a community lives and believes is one of the major factors in how people within that community will also believe and live. As an example, Fowler's work on faith development identified that many adults remain in what he terms the "synthetic-conventional" stage throughout their lifetime, persons who experience faith as an amalgamation of the centers of value and power offered by important others in their social environment, a stage that begins in adolescence (Fowler 1999). As creatures who have evolved through social cooperation, who communicate through shared language and categories of meaning, the people around us are still essential to how we think about the world and what is good within it. The constitution of these communities has evolved and perhaps become distorted in an age of social media and diminished institutional belonging, but the influence of those around us matters in the formation of our commitments and worldviews. Communities remain essential to human identity formation, even though communities are less stable, more networked, and more episodic than in prior generations.

Additionally, in the educational theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, which have undergirded a great deal of theoretical work in Christian religious education in the past half century, the role of the community is essential to the construction of knowledge (Dewey 1997; Freire 2000). Through communal processes of shared exploration, discovery, and work, participants reconstruct knowledge

suitable to contemporary contexts, which is the occasion for true learning, as opposed to indoctrination or forced assimilation into social norms. These theoretical underpinnings reinforce a sense of the need for cooperative community for adequate learning to occur.

However, in many non-Christian contexts outside the United States, voluntary congregations are not considered necessary for the formation of religious belief. Studies of immigrant groups have noted that coming into the US forced other religious groups into a voluntary congregational structure even when this is atypical in the country of origin. For example, building local mosques became a necessity for Muslim immigrants: "Lay involvement in mosque activities becomes important for preserving both religious and ethnic identities, a challenge not found in their Muslim countries" (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, pp. 137–38). A key element of establishing a congregation was providing religious education for members in forms recognizable in US culture: "Immigrant congregations are also incorporating Christian ways of imparting religious education by offering Sunday school classes for children and adults. For example, some Buddhists hold sutra study classes for the youth as well as adults; the Zoroastrians have Gatha classes, modeled on Protestant Bible study groups" (Yang and Ebaugh 2001, p. 277). The congregational setting and the schooling model of religious education were seen by incoming groups as essential to form and preserve both ethnic and religious identity in a US setting by new immigrant groups.

Despite the normativity of congregations as an expression of religious life in the United States, participation in congregational life has become less of a normative behavior. In her work on religious belief in Britain, sociologist of religion Grace Davie originally offered the descriptor "believing without belonging" to explain the disparity in survey data between the numbers of people who claim Christian identity or belief in God and the numbers of people who actually participate regularly in worship or education in local parishes (Davie 1994). Davie reflects on how powerful this phrase chosen for the subtitle of her book had become in global academic and ministry circles in her more recent work, noting that it clearly captured the imagination and experience of the lingering power of Christian historical identity within societies where religious affiliation and participation has declined tremendously (Davie 2015). She also gives witness to the more episodic nature of community in "new style" religion, where participation in organized religion is taking place, either through large festivals or smaller cell groups, drawing on the categorization of Linda Woodhead: "In 'new style' religion, moreover, authority is dispersed and communication takes place through a wide variety of media; the agency of the individual believer is considerably enhanced. The stress lies in finding yourself rather than in a definitive form of salvation" (Davie 2015, p. 225). This more individualized religiosity is often described in US contexts as "spiritual but not religious," again based on sociological surveys where participants claimed that they considered themselves spiritual people even though they were not affiliated with a religious community or tradition, and marked by an emphasis on choice rather than obligation, and diffuse rather than centralized authority in defining religious belief and practice.

A recent study by sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman and colleagues set out to document the kind of individualized religiosity identified in the "believing without belonging" demographic (Ammerman 2013). However, her work also indicated the continued importance of communities of faith in religious formation in the US context. Having set out to document everyday spiritual practices in a time of declining institutional affiliation, she notes a surprising finding: "One of the most striking results of this research has been the degree to which participation in organized religion matters" (Ammerman 2013, p. 301). The researchers found in many arenas that they examined that attending services frequently made a difference in the participants' practice and that participation in a site of interaction where religious or spiritual language was the common language led to adoption of increased spiritual elements into their lives. She notes, "So when we ask about the sites in which spiritual discourse is produced, congregations and other organized spiritual groups are both obvious places to look and surprisingly downplayed in a culture and a discipline that have glorified the life of the individual spiritual seeker" (Ammerman 2013, p. 301).

Given this deep assumption about the importance of the congregation to the formation of religious belief, the primary response by many denominations to the decline in membership and regular attendance in their congregations is to attempt to reverse the trend by reviving congregations as communities of vital practice. Imagining that religious education or transmission of the tradition to the next generation is impossible without membership in a local community, denominations such as my own, the United Methodist Church, have poured energy and resources into church growth, into improving clergy efficacy and leadership skills, and into evangelism and marketing efforts to attempt to reverse the decline of its congregations.

In the literature of Christian religious education, recent works by Boyung Lee and Charles Foster have continued to emphasize the importance of community in congregational education. In the work of Foster, the loss of a “catechetical culture of formation in congregations” has been a major factor in the collapse of faith formation (Foster 2012). The loss of intergenerational mentoring and a compelling narrative of God in the congregational space leads to the need to rebuild the catechetical community as an adaptive change necessary for the transmission of faith from generation to generation. He believes this challenge “requires a lively and ecclesially grounded educational imagination” that challenges and reframes the technological orientation and marketing strategies that are dominating conversations about educational work in congregations (Foster 2012, p. 120). The primary context for that educational work remains established Christian congregations.

Religious educator Boyung Lee’s concerns about the importance of congregations also stem from her sense that vibrant community is sparse in the individualistic context of the United States. Although she understands the congregation as an important base for educational work, she joins Foster in not assuming that congregations already have the kind of community that is necessary for religious education: “Thus helping congregation members to be connected to one another will be an important role for a leader to play: creating safe leaning environments and sound relationships among members is integral to both personal and communal transformation” (Lee 2013, p. 69). She also speaks of the need for the church to “... not wait for people to come to educational programs, but bring your religious education to where people are and where community is and can be created” (Lee 2013, p. 69). This admonition shares this sensibility of the community that educates as somewhat distinct from the institutional church. Her approach of the Traveling Bible Study, an effort that met over lunch and in relationship to the workplaces of the adult participants, where they could wrestle with how notions of evil and temptation played out in their daily lives, is an interesting compromise between a desire for communal interaction and educational events presented in a time and place related to the ongoing lives of participants. Her attention to how improved administrative structures in congregations can support good educational work belies her belief that congregations are still an essential community for this work, but her proposals indicate deep listening to the context where institutional life can be burdensome to maintain and may interrupt the formation of community.

Mai-Anh Le Tran asks a harder question, namely, whether we are deceiving ourselves in thinking about preserving something “pure and precious” at the core of congregational life, and whether, instead, congregations might themselves be part of the problem. She notes the inefficacy of response to changing cultural conditions: “Put differently, responses to tectonic structural shifts in mainline Protestant churches seem to range somewhere between fearful paralysis and entrepreneurial fits. At either end of the spectrum, the obsession is still centripetal—inwardly focused, myopically spiraling” (Tran 2017, p. 56). She ponders the erasure of memory, habitus of *disimagination*, fractured sanctuary, use of the Bible as a weapon of mass destruction, and banking curricula of mainstream congregations and asks seriously about the violent nature of religious education in these congregational settings (Tran 2017, p. 57). However, she speaks hopefully about “faithful individuals and congregations engaged in valiant action against the public pedagogies of *disimagination*” (Tran 2017, p. 75). But her vision of the church is a community in transit, organically improvisational, an “enabling community of practice” that is able to be “responsive to specific situations, contexts, and needs” (Tran 2017, p. 147), rather than a settled and powerful institution. This community is imagined by Tran primarily in

moments of protest and witness and resistance, a “kind of protested faith for Christian communities—a faith that is tested and testing, protested and protesting in the midst of contemporary social dis-ease” (Tran 2017, p. 129).

### 3. The Future of Religious Education beyond Congregations

In my own work as a religious educator, I often collapse the idea of an educational community with the idea of an institutional structure or an established congregation. This may be a particularly dominant culture understanding of community as most commonly embedded in institutional forms. The assumed control over formative environments expressed in the congregation as center of the social life of human communities, serving as the dominant religious environment that will shape the next generation, is an expression of mainstream white Christian privilege. Communities without this privilege often generated much more robust versions of religious education because they assumed that, as a minority population, they would have to work hard to pass on the wisdom of the tradition to the next generation. This has been true for, say, the highly committed religious educational efforts of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Their invention of before-school seminary and school release time religious education came from the concern that their nondominant tradition would not survive without careful attention to education. Historically, the work of Catholic and Jewish parochial schools in the era of Protestant-dominated public education in the United States has also been an example of this phenomenon. In fact, the decline of the cultural prominence of mainline protestant denominations might be a boon to their practices of religious education through other communal means.

Letting go of the presumed congregational context also raises significant concerns for the practice of religious education. Stable institutional life has allowed for paid full-time, educated clergy to be supported in their work in many white mainline congregations. If education is to happen in more provisional communities that are not institutionally-based, the question of where teachers and mentors will come from with the time to craft educational experiences arises. Of course, a problem already exists in recruiting and training volunteer teachers and mentors in many congregations, as well as having voluntary learning participants. But this experience is shared with nondominant communities, where clergy and religious leaders have often been bivocational, unpaid, and in some cases, without the benefit of theological education or other professional preparation for their work.

If we take seriously that formal religious institutions or congregational contexts do not seem a relevant context for even those pursuing theological education, we have to begin thinking differently about the future of religious education in the United States. What allowed me to resume teaching an introductory religious education class was the recent work of many colleagues in the field of religious education who do not presume the context of the congregation as a primary context for religious education. These authors have struggled to articulate the importance of religious education in response to violence in particular, and almost none of them rely on an institutionally-based community of faith as a reliable socializing or educating community. Nevertheless, they simultaneously witness to the importance of a gathered community for the role of support of vocation, experiences of revelation, and resisting the violence and injustice of US culture in the name of Christian commitment. These are scholars for whom community is essential, but the congregation is negotiable or even undesirable as a context for religious education. As Mai-Anh Le Tran expresses her doubts about congregations: “In what ways are Christian faith communities plagued by enduring violence, perpetuated explicitly and implicitly through forms of religious educational malpractice?” (Tran 2017, p. 56). These colleagues are paying attention to conditions on the ground, and they have heard, particularly from younger generations, concerns about the viability of formal religious institutions in addressing the deepest hurts and needs for education experienced by their communities.

One example of this is the work of Leah Gunning Francis describing religious education in the wake of the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Francis 2015). In her interviews with a number of religious leaders and activists who were part of the ongoing response to this extrajudicial killing, Francis describes disconnects between younger and older generations, particularly the distance

between the faith leaders in established religious communities and the young activists organizing the nightly protests. This work gives witness to the need for leaders of established religious communities to put their bodies on the line and learn to follow in solidarity the lead of a new generation that is leading a different kind of religious transformation. She notes, "Often the clergy would follow the lead of the young people by listening to them, offering advice when warranted, and giving them space to find their own voices. They supported, affirmed, and prayed for the young activists" (Francis 2015, p. 157). Francis and Tran shared the experience of watching and participating in the dramatic public liturgies and protests that served as a provisional and powerful context for religious education within the Black Lives Matter movement.

Not coincidentally, these new explorations come primarily from scholars of color, who recognize that the primary formative environments of their community do not always seek their flourishing. As Patrick Reyes puts it, bluntly, "How am I going to live when the world wants me dead?" (Reyes 2016, p. 3). In his work on vocational discernment, he points to the importance of "elders, ancestors and communities" (Reyes 2016, p. 127). The communities that Reyes speaks of, where the work of education will happen, are not necessarily established institutions with budgets. He speaks of the exhausting work of "showing up for each other," (Reyes 2016, p. 145) and "building a space where we hold each other authentically, from heart to heart" (Reyes 2016, p. 144). Because, as he notes, "Even when we follow God's call, people of color still operate in a rigged game," (Reyes 2016, p. 49), he imagines formative communities as the struggle to "hold space" for a community to bring together their knowledge for survival and being called to life and share it. "What my education gave me was a set of skills, an ability to navigate multiple worlds so I could hold the space for new knowledge to emerge, and the responsibility to make an impact with what I was learning in the classroom in my own community" (Reyes 2016, p. 145). At times, this means resisting, saying *basta* to the people and institutions that do not call you to life, and saying that prophetically and with force. But as Reyes and Francis imagine the community of formative environment, they point not to established congregations, but to communities of solidarity and engagement that require a struggle to create in the midst of less-than-ideal conditions. This notion of faith community as existing short term, of faith community not as a well-resourced and established institution, and of faith community as something that has to be fought for threads throughout these works. They spark a different and important imagination for religious education beyond congregations, embedded in provisional communities of solidarity and engagement.

My white mainline Protestant students are in the midst of what practical theologian Tom Beaudoin calls "witnessing to dispossession" (Beaudoin 2008). Their formal religious institutions that once held cultural dominance no longer hold anything close to the formative influence they once held, perhaps rightly so, given the histories of colonizing practice and white supremacy that informed their beginnings and the trajectories of their ministries. Continuing to imagine religious educational practice as primarily a formative or even transformative task located in congregations severely limits the practice of religious education, given this shift. Letting go of the assumption of a stable community of identity that forms members through embodied practice allows movement toward imagining religious education in the midst of provisional and episodic engagement and imagining the actual work necessary to build communities of solidarity and engagement across difference.

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