

Teacher of Religion

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Charged with the instruction and formation of others in religious doctrine and practice, the religion teacher differs from other teachers not simply in the subject with which the teaching is concerned, but also by possession of a particular charism from God and a derivative authority in the religious assembly. This article confines its attention to the teacher of the Judeo-Christian religion.

Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel, as a community taught by Yahweh, never forgot its patriarchal origins in its emphasis on parents as the first teachers of religion (Dt4.9; 6.6–7; 11.19; 32.46). While the mother gave the rudiments of the moral education that might extend even into the adolescence of the child (Prv 1.8; 6.20; 31.1), the father, having marked his son with circumcision as the sign of the covenant (Gn 17.12; Lv 12.3; cf. Lk 2.21), performed the sacred duty of communicating the history of salvation (Ex 10.2; 12.26–27; 13.8). The paternal role in religious education was so marked that it explains how priests, who were also teachers of sacred doctrine, came to be called father (Jgs 17.10; 18.19). The familial character of the religious teacher is stressed as well in the liturgical setting; the sacrifice was offered in the temple, but it was at the domestic table during the Passover meal that the child asked and the father responded on the meaning of the sacred event commemorated.

Fathers and the Patriarchs, however, were not the sole teachers of religion in Israel. Moses' mission as lawgiver involved the teaching of religion and indeed divine assistance in that sacred task (Ex 4.12). The teaching apostolate was likewise confided to Aaron and his Levites, i.e., to the priesthood (Lv 10.11). The Prophets were in a rather special sense teachers of religion; without hierarchic office, their teaching authority apparently was derived from some direct, charismatic experience of the divine with a consequent mandate to communicate the divine message. Then the sages of Israel, whose religious teachings are preserved in the Wisdom literature of the **Old Testament**, were teachers not only of purely religious doctrine, but of secular prudence as well. Finally, Israel had its rabbis as interpreters of the Torah. In the diaspora, especially after the destruction of the Temple, Jewish teachers had formal schools (the elementary house of the book and the more advanced house of study for adolescent boys) besides the synagogue or house of prayer. The elementary teacher was a voluntary worker whose pay was poor, but who was ennobled so by the glory of the divine word that the Talmud wanted him venerated as God Himself was venerated.

New Testament. The logia reserved the title of teacher for the Christ alone (Mt 23.10), and the Disciples were forbidden the title of teacher (Mt 23.8). Moreover, other NT writers (1 Jn 2.27; 1 Pt 2.9; cf. Heb 8.11; Jn6.45) see in the advent of the Spirit the fulfillment of the prophecies that there would no longer be need of teachers (Is 54.13; Jer 31.34). Yet Jesus permitted others to call Him teacher (Jn 13.13) and sent His disciples to teach all men to observe the things He had commanded them (Mt 28.19). The early Church also recognized distinct persons as teachers of religion (Acts 13.1; 1

Cor 12.28; Eph 4.11). **St. Paul**, who sees his own apostolate as teaching (2 Tm 1.11), admonishes parents on their role as teachers of religion (Eph 6.1–4) and instructs Timothy and Titus on their task of teaching (1 Tm 4.11, 13, 16; 2 Tm 1.13; 4.2; Ti 1.9; 2.1, 7).

The paradox may be resolved by a consideration of the response of faith to the Christian teacher. Jesus is *the* Teacher as the complete Word of the Father (cf. Heb 1:1–2). While His spoken word reached only the few of His time and place, His Spirit teaches all truth (Jn 16.13) to all united to Him in Baptism and in faith. The Cenacle on the Pentecost after the Resurrection is only the first and visible advent of the Spirit. The activity of Christ through His spirit continues forever throughout the world until His return. Nevertheless, just as the Sacraments are needed for the visible extension of Christ's sanctifying mission throughout the ages to all nations, so also the proclamation of His word by preachers and deeper instruction in the meaning of that word require other teachers of religion.

Primitive church. This work of teaching the religion of Christ (*magisterium*) is the responsibility of the Church, especially the Apostles (not just the Twelve) who are themselves both disciples and witnesses of Christ. The appointed successors of the Apostles in the primitive Church were called names other than teacher (e.g., overseers, comforters), which were not altogether synonymous but are now almost impossible to distinguish. As the Church assumed more definite organizational structures, sharper distinctions gradually emerged. These teachers (*didaskaloi*; see *Didache* 13.2; 15.2; *Epistle of Barnabas* 1.8; 4.9; Hermas, *Visiones* 3.5.1; *Similitudines* 9.15.4) seem to have been soon absorbed into the clergy, the bishop taking the duty of a principal teacher, a role he most often performed in a liturgical context, that is, in homilies on the Gospel and other Scripture texts. Some of the teachings of the great bishops and Fathers is preserved in catechetical discourses and sermons, e.g., the instructions delivered by St. Cyril of Jerusalem to those preparing for Baptism and to those who had just been baptized [see F. L. Cross, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on Christian Sacraments* (London 1951) and *The Great Catechetical Discourse of St. Gregory of Nyssa*, tr. J. R. Shawley (London 1917)]. Even in this period of a more or less formal catechesis in the Church, the parental teacher of religion was not forgotten. St. John Chrysostom's *Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children* (tr. M. L. W. Laistner, Ithaca 1951) not only insists on the obligation but instructs parents in method. [see church, ii (theology of).]

Teachers of theology. From the beginning, there appears some distinction between the catechist who prepared the catechumen for Baptism and the teacher of a more advanced and deeper study of the faith already received. The problem of a Christian gnosis, a confrontation and harmony of the Christian message and human, secular knowledge in the same teacher, is etched more sharply in the catechetical school of Pantaenus at Alexandria and in its derivatives at Antioch and Edessa. Clement of Alexandria in his *Paedagogus* (tr. Simon P. Wood, *Christ the Educator*, [New York](#) 1954) shows this development from persuasion and formation to instruction. Origen, like his predecessors, began as a catechist, but as sophisticated converts returned for further

instruction after Baptism, he and others turned to a more refined, often subtle and allegorical exegesis of Scripture and to the uses of philosophy. The Eastern Fathers, especially the two Gregories, expected the teacher of religion to be well versed in non-Christian culture; Western Fathers, such as Jerome and Gregory the Great, not to mention Tertullian, were suspicious of pagan learning. The significant historical fact is that Christian teachers remained in pagan schools, and the Christian teachers of religion did not yet attempt to teach in their own schools anything but religion.

St. Augustine (354–430), in his earlier career as teacher and later life as bishop, as well as in his writings, both theoretical and practical, on teachers, represents the acme of patristic teaching, at least in the West. To leave aside his own observations in the *Confessions* and in the *De magistro* as only indirectly pertinent, careful attention should be given to his *De doctrina christiana* (John Gavigan, New York 1947) and *De catechizandis rudibus* for important insights into the character and function of the teacher of religion. The latter is addressed to the deacon Deogratias of Carthage, who had requested from the bishop of Hippo some advice on first instructions for the catechumens. The reply concerns itself with the catechist himself, who is always being taught even as he teaches. He is especially warned against discouragement with the *rudes* (the very young and the very simple under instruction). The teacher of religion is to be cheerful in countenance and bearing as he presents sacred history to the catechumens, who may be variously disposed. The *De doctrina christiana* is more concerned with the formation of the teacher than with the art of pedagogy. A program for the exploitation of every human means possible to understand the sacred text is proposed, and there as in other places, such as the *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate*, St. Augustine provides models for religion teachers.

Monastic teachers. Among the monks of the 4th century, the *apa* (the Coptic term for father) was first of all the teacher of other solitaries and cenobites who came to him as one experienced in the ways of asceticism and mystical experience. At times in the later development of monasticism, children were taken in to be taught by the monks, but this practice was generally discouraged except under the legal fiction of preparation for the monastic life. The monks for a long time were laymen and unlettered; any presumption on their part to assume a teaching office in the Church was sternly rebuked by the bishops. However, as the institution of monasticism developed, especially in the West, into a more lettered and erudite society, and as more monks received Holy Orders, it was quite natural for the monks to become teachers to the unlettered. A further evolution of religious life provided the Church with a new type of religion teacher; the friars of the high Middle Ages were apostolic in character. They derived their way of life not simply from the monks but from the canons regular, the cathedral clerics who were often teachers, and ultimately from the primitive Christian community described in the Acts of the Apostles. The friars, although they began with popular preaching, quite naturally gravitated toward the newly founded universities.

Teachers of religion in universities. The masters and doctors of the medieval institutions of learning owed much of their ancestry to their Greco-Roman predecessors; the teacher of Catholic truth, whom St. Thomas Aquinas mentions in the first sentence of his *Summa*, owes more to St. Paul and to Christ. The theologians with their precision

based on Scripture and common sense carefully distinguished their own role. Private exhortation, that personal admonition that is a call to repentance, is every Christian's business. The university teacher of sacred doctrine, however, must be scientifically competent to carry on a purely objective and intellectual teaching (St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae, 177.2; 3a, 55.2; IV *Sent.* 6.2.2 ad 2; *In 1 Cor.* 11.2; 14.7; *In 1 Tim.* 2.3; *In Tit.* 2.3). Moreover, the instruction of the little ones was carried on not only by devoted parish priests but by the ambient culture of stone and stained glass. The prescriptions concerning the teaching of religion in the constitutions of John Peckham, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 1279, may at times have been more honored in the breach, but there were good Christian parents, devoted parsons, and the marketplace preaching of the friars. Like St. Augustine, the scholastic teachers theorized on the nature of their operation (e.g., Hugh of Saint-Victor's *Treatise on the Pursuit of Learning*; John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* and *Metalogicon*; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, 1; 117.1; *De Ver.* 11.1), seeing the teacher as an external principle assisting the principal and divine Teacher acting from within.

Post-Tridentine period. A partial cause of the Reformation was the paucity and poor quality of teachers of religion. While the earlier humanists and the later Protestant reformers attempted to ameliorate the situation on their terms, the Church drew on its own resources. Besides Tridentine decrees on the teaching of religion, there were new religious orders devoted in particular to this work of mercy. St. Ignatius for one was quick to see that the Church needed a learned body of disciplined teachers who would not only teach the humanities but order them to the greater glory of God in the souls of the pupils. The emphasis that the ratio studiorum of the Jesuits put on the teacher of religion bore fruit in the work of such men as St. Peter Canisius. The Brothers of the Christian Schools (1695) founded by St. John Baptist de la Salle were most influential as teachers of religion to poor and ignorant boys, not only in France but throughout the world. Numerous congregations of women also were founded for the specific purpose of the religious education of children and young women. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (1562) used lay teachers for the instruction of children in Sunday schools. Protestants also used lay instructors, and the Bible teacher represented an important contribution to the teaching of the Protestant religion.

Twentieth century. In the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council, greater emphasis was put on the teaching role of parents. Although the council emphasized the obligation of parents to educate their children in faith, it recognized the importance of schools in religious education and those who undertake a teaching career in the name of the Christian community (*Gravissimum educationis* 3, 5). The words of the council echo in "guidelines for reflection and renewal" published by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988). The congregation describes the religion teacher as "the key, the vital component, if the educational goals of the [Catholic] school are to be achieved." Because their effectiveness is closely tied to their personal witness, teachers of religion "must be men and women endowed with many gifts, both natural and supernatural." They must have "a thorough cultural, professional, and pedagogical training, and they must be capable of genuine dialogue" (n. 96). The distinction made by the Congregation between religious instruction and catechesis (n.68) is repeated in the *General Directory*

for *Catechesis* (1997) which further describes the characteristics of religious instruction and the need for interdisciplinary dialog (n. 73-74).

Bibliography: The teacher of religion is usually treated indirectly and in passing in works on Christian education, catechesis, etc. For Old Testament, see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, J. Mc Hugh (New York 1961). New Testament: Y. M. J. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Tr. D. Attwater (Westminster, Md. 1957). The Fathers. H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, G. Lamb (New York 1956) 419-465. General. G. Sloyan, ed., *Shaping the Christian Message* (New York 1958; pa. 1963). R. Masterson ed., *Theology in the Catholic College* (Dubuque, Iowa 1961). M. Sauvage, *Catéchèse et Laïcat* (Paris 1962). Urban Voll, "The Teacher in the Church" (*Proceedings of the North American Liturgical Week* ; Philadelphia, Pa. 1964); "The Sacred Teacher," in *Proceedings of the Society of Catholic College Teachers of Sacred Doctrine* 10 (1964) 7-138. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal* (Rome 1988). P. W. Carey and E. C. Muller, eds., *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition* (New York 1997).

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