RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND THE THEOLOGIAN'S WORK

In attempting to serve the American Church the theologian today must be attuned to the psychological ramifications which religious ideas and practices effect in people's lives and within the context of our particular culture. Many reactions which seem logically or historically incoherent may be more acutely understood by grasping the personal psychological dynamics involved. The thoughts of Erik Erikson on the subject of psychological identity seem to offer a number of extremely valuable insights in this area. My own thinking has been to take Erikson's construct of identity and pursue possibilities for understanding how religious ideas are incorporated into it. The resulting model has provided me with a tool that has been quite useful when dealing with seminary students, priests in continuing education workshops, and lay adults in parish education programs. After a somewhat technical description of the model of "religious identity," a few practical considerations for its use will be outlined.

"RELIGIOUS IDENTITY"

Religious identity as used in this presentation has a very specialized meaning; it refers to that area or dimension of an individual's psychological make-up which results when the process of Ego identity meshes or joins with particular elements of a faith-system. It does not simply describe someone who holds religious convictions with a great deal of awareness—as the term is often used. To clarify this technical use, some preliminary ideas need to be spelled out.

Faith-system refers to the external elements of a religion (formulated beliefs, rituals, ethical norms, social institutions, etc.) which stand apart from an individual's acceptance of them and confront him as elements to be accepted or rejected. An organized religion is a social reality which possesses an objectivity within a social group; its outward expressions impinge on the individual and interact with his or her psychological development, especially if the religious symbols are accepted and believed as meaningful.[1] The word "system" adjoined to

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"faith" indicates this exteriority.

Process of Ego Identity refers to a series of dynamic moments operative in the psychological make-up of each person, a dynamism which will give a particular configuration to the Ego of that person. The ideas of Erikson are closely adhered to in the following explanations.[2]

Although the notion of Ego identity possesses a fluidity and eludes any neat definitions, one may discern several major aspects of the process. These should be carefully noted for they are of immense importance in the way an individual will possibly accept and assimilate religious ideas and practices.

1) *An integration of self-images, both positive and negative.* Out of the intermingling of many impressions of self there is a tendency to create an "I," a perception of one's autonomy. The confronting of multiple images of self begins to produce a central, unified image of "I." This "I" has an autonomy but it extends into each of the self-images.[3]

2) *Which possesses a thread of continuity in one's consciousness of space and time.* A perception of self-sameness emerges and the ability comes to see variation and sameness in one's personality. Changes in ideas, emotions, etc. do not of themselves create unresolved conflicts in identity. A past and present are discovered.

3) *In which one appreciates and positively values one's own powers and abilities.* Here the quality of uniqueness or specialness is added to an individual's life (the integration and continuity of 1), and there is grasped the inherent ability to enrich the lives of others, to share. Self-confidence and an ability to trust is born.

4) *That allows and causes planning for a realistic future.* Initiative and responsibility come forward and the development of the person's life as well as the lives of others is pursued and hoped for. Enrichment can be achieved by action.

5) *Which continuity and planning are recognized and respected by "Significant Others."* The individual recognizes that he or she is a suc-

[1]Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 3-28.

[2]Cf. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 1963[2], 1950; *Insights and Responsibility*, 1964; *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 1968.

[3]Erikson, *Identity*, p. 217.

cessful variant of a group identity, a defined Ego within a social reality. The Significant Others may be a small number of people or large societal groups which the individual respects and seeks some attention from.

When all of these factors are actualized in a person's life a sense of dignity and self-esteem is created, which forms a stable foundation for living in healthy interaction with society. Dignity, above all, is the keynote of a formed identity! Within every human person the five steps of this process are pushing and seeking some actualization.

Erikson's view of Ego identity is correctly called psycho-social. This means that the various aspects of the process of Ego identity are actualized by contact with social realities such as the family, political institutions, or organized religions. It is the interaction with a religion (better faith-system) which gives rise to a religious identity.

Religious identity thus indicates the psychological reality which results from the entwining of a person's process of Ego identity with the objective elements of a definite religion. It is important to realize that a religious identity, once formed, assumes its own dynamic and mode of operation, a dynamic resulting from the particular intersection of religious element with psychological condition. This means that a person with a strong religious identity may not follow the inherent logic and normal progression of the particular faith-system he has accepted—which fact is quite evident on the contemporary scene.

Let me illustrate with an example. A person's drive to "plan for a realistic future" may be actualized by the apostolic or missionary activity of a particular religion. He becomes a missionary; if the psychological dependence is close he will resist any inherent theological development of the religion's missionary views because, without realizing it, part of his Ego identity is at stake.

A religious identity therefore is not necessarily co-extensive with the objective elements of a faith-system, e.g. a Catholic identity will not necessarily include all basic doctrines of the traditional faith. A religious identity is selective about the aspects of a faith-system it incorporates. Those elements are primarily chosen which serve to actualize, support, or expand the normal processes of Ego identity operative in the individual's life.

We may identify two fundamental components of a religious identity: (1) *The functioning elements.* These are the particular aspects of a

faith-system which become entwined in the process of Ego identity. Any part of the faith-system may be drawn into a religious identity, from a central belief (Jesus, Church, etc.) to a very peripheral ritual practice (Latin language, rosary, etc.). (2) *Specific dynamisms.* This refers to the manner in which a functioning element acts upon the developing process of a person's Ego identity, the type of "emotional cement" which binds the aspect of the faith-system to the process. Several types of dynamisms may be articulated: (a) formative—where the component of the faith-system serves to actualize the process of Ego identity; (b) supportive—it confirms the developing identity which is already actualizing under other social influences; (c) expansive—it encourages the continued growth of a formed Ego identity.

The total pattern of an individual's religious identity will be composed of a number of functioning elements, each with a specific dynamism attached. The activity of this religious identity constitutes an immensely powerful force in a person's life, a force which will often cause them to dismiss any logical or reasonable development of the faith-system itself. Unconsciously they are fearful that their whole psychological identity will dissolve if these religious elements are tampered with. To deal with such a person it will be necessary to make them aware of the processes occurring in them. Spreading such an awareness should be a major concern of theologians desirous of serving the American Church.

CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS RELATED TO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN U.S. CATHOLICISM

The most massive problem is understanding how various types of religious identities react and adjust to the phenomenon of change. Much will depend upon the "specific dynamisms" attached to the religious aspects. Where the dynamism is primarily formative, i.e. the religious element has actualized the psychological process, only with the utmost difficulty will the person accede to any tampering with the religious point. An important step will be to outline a methodology toward helping persons shift their religious identities from a formative style to an expansive one. Such will not be an easy task in the fluidity and pluralism of contemporary American society.

The persistence of the pre-Vatican II mentality through the changes of the past decade may be understood as the continuance of a highly formative religious identity. An immigrant Catholicism not appreciated by society and political power at large turned to religion for the actualizing of personal identities. The unified belief and hierarchy of Catholicism served the integration necessary; the Church's long tradition in liturgy and devotion provided continuity; the school system and private societies pointed to a belief in and appreciation of one's own powers and abilities; faithfulness to the Holy Father and Rome was rewarded by attention from these "Significant Others." Until these psychological ramifications are dealt with the religious identity will remain operative and powerful.

Other factors on the contemporary scene evidence the continuance of the ongoing formation of religious identity in the U.S. Church. Is not the resurgence of the strong ethnic dimension in religion indicative of a search for continuity and individual valuation in a society becoming progressively faceless? Is not the infatuation of young people with types of conversion experiences (Jesus people, Pentecostalism, etc.) an effort to seek some kind of integration in a world of bewildering plurality? Is not the strong acceptance by young seminarians of the "role-identity" of the priest a desire to win attention from a group of Significant Others? The forming of religious identities does not stop, but the theologian should be trying to see that the process does not result in the hardening of faith and religious experience into highly formative religious identities.

THE THEOLOGIAN'S EFFORTS AND CATHOLIC IDENTITIES

The first need is simply to be aware of the process and be informed as to where Catholic identities are being formed in the United States. This will enable the theologian to grasp a group's aptitude for listening and being open to further developments. If he has understood what is happening he should also be able to formulate some guidelines as to the presentation of his own ideas and programs. In the past decade we Catholic theologians often made mistakes because the dynamics of change and the presence of a strong religious identity were not recognized.

Secondly, theologians may positively engage in the formulating of various Catholic identities. Recognize psycho-social needs of people in our culture and seek where the Catholic faith-system may help to fulfill these needs without unconsciously falling into a formative dependency. Such an awareness is necessary if theologians are to prevent peripheral elements of the faith-system from assuming the centrality of concern, as occurred in American immigrant Catholicism. We need to become more deeply concerned with what are the basic elements of the Catholic faith, emphasize these, and show their coherence with a person's process of Ego identity.

Lastly, let me indicate three personal methods in which I have attempted to use the model of "religious identity."

1) To describe a dimension of faith as the "formation of a Catholic identity." This stresses the personal, interior, human-building aspect of faith and also makes people aware of this psychological dimension in their religion. It also allows them to seek a state of conviction where a real trust or confidence is felt in the faith and a dignity derived from it. Such a dimension will ultimately need to be integrated with the more objective faith-system, doctrines, liturgy, etc. In my experience lay groups have been very responsive to such an approach.

2) To see one's personal identity as the responding agent in an act of faith. This brings in not only the intellect, will, and emotions but also the individualness of one's life with its unique experiences.

3) For theology students: impress upon them that a basic task of pastoral theology is the formation of a Catholic identity in individuals and groups. As priests they shall have to work to build within their people an image of the faith which will convey a sense of dignity and an ability to stand as credible people in our society today. The students have picked this up and found it a very personal and challenging part of their pastoral task.

This opens the following questions for discussion: (1) Does a religious identity necessarily occur in every faith-experience? (2) By what criteria does one judge the validity or authenticity, the rightness or wrongness of a particular religious identity? (3) What kind of relations exist between a religious identity and the whole of the faith-system? For example, could the existence of a particular religious identity be a valid excuse for holding erroneous views about the faith-system, granted the

autonomous and independent mechanisms of the process of Ego identity?

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