THE USE OF PHYSICAL SYMBOLS TO TRANSMIT CULTURE IN RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS: A COMPARISON OF ADVENTIST AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN AMERICA

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Abstract
This is a report of research conducted in the United States to study how religious schools transmit their religious culture through religious symbols. It compares the situation of Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist schools. Principals of ten high schools and ten elementary schools in each system were interviewed using a protocol developed for the study. The results indicated that the most dominant symbols in the Catholic schools were the crucifix and a statue or picture of the Blessed Mother while the most frequent symbol in the Adventist schools was a picture of Christ. While the Adventist schools had more symbolism than we expected at the outset of the research we found that the Catholic schools were much more intentional about the use of symbolism.

Key Words: physical symbol, transmit culture, religious school, Adventists, Catholics

INTRODUCTION

Organized religion propagates the faith through a number of means including auxiliary institutions. Within the major divisions of Christianity many denominations utilize the school to carry out their mission of spreading their faith. In the United States these schools fill a number of roles in addition to that of the sponsoring church. Such schools usually fulfill legally mandated compulsory school attendance and thus function in the public interest as well as for sectarian purposes. However, the religious mission of such schools is of foremost concern to those who are responsible for matters of governance. While the public has a number of institutions to achieve the public good, the church has only limited means to achieve its religious purpose. Thus a clear focus on objectives is essential.

Within the broad context of Christianity, churches attempt to instill within their adherents certain values or doctrinal beliefs. Some of these might include a consciousness of God as evidenced in the life of His Son Jesus, nurture of and continuous development of a Christlike character and full
participation in the family of God in the form of the church (Pazmino 1997, p. 104). The religious school makes an important contribution to the mission of the church as it seeks to instill these and more denominationally specific values within the minds of youth who are placed under their care. One view of this effort at value transmission is that it is primarily a transmission of culture. Religious culture both consists of and is transmitted by rituals and symbols (McLaren 1993).

Symbols are human creations. They help people to make sense of their world, a world that they often find to be uncertain and ambiguous. They are the icons, the myths, the stories and the rituals that people use to provide direction, increase predictability, and resolve confusion (Bolman & Deal 1991).

As beings that are both body and spirit, humans use symbols in order to perceive and to grasp realities that are not empirical. As social beings, humans use symbols to communicate with others. From a theological perspective, symbols are the means that God uses to communicate with people. “Wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both his greatness and his nearness” (United States Catholic Conference 1994, p. 297). Similarly, human beings use symbols to communicate with God. “Washing and anointing, breaking bread and sharing the cup can express . . . man’s gratitude toward his Creator” (United States Catholic Conference 1994, p. 297).

Thus, symbols play a powerful role in the transmission of the culture of human society (Deal & Peterson 1999). Schools, especially religious schools, can make good use of this fact as they function to pass on the religious heritage of their sponsoring denomination. These schools are laden with specific values which must be identified in the most effective way possible for the youth who attend. Children and youth are not alarmed with an environment rich in religious artifacts as they have been surrounded by symbols all their lives. Schools rich in symbolism can create a strong learning environment that helps children in the task of knowledge acquisition (Gardner 1991). Further, religious symbols provide a compelling way of helping young people view reality and their location within that reality. This is especially important as the schools helps young minds comprehend God and His transcendent qualities (McLaren 1993).

The central thesis guiding this research is that Catholic and Adventists imagine the relationship of God and the world differently. Because of this, while they have many characteristics in common, Catholic and Adventist schools will differ in their approaches to the relationship of God and the world. We look in this research specifically at the use of symbols as