A Vision and Practices of Hope

Patrick Manning, Ph.D.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18)

“In you, my God, my body will rest in hope” (Christian Night Prayer; cf. Psalm 16)

Précis: Ours is an era in which many are losing hope, as indicated by rising rates of suicide and severe anxiety across the U.S. While public and educational institutions respond to this crisis in their own ways, religious educators have a distinctive role to play in rekindling hope by drawing upon the life-giving visions and practices of their religious traditions. This presentation describes the work of religious educators as “coaches” of the imagination and body, highlighting the special promise of fostering a meaningful vision and practices for restoring hope in the lives of contemporary people.

Topic
The topic of this poster presentation is the role of religious educators in promoting a vision of hope in a pluralistic, fragmented culture. The highest national suicide rate in 30 years and a mental health crisis across the country’s colleges and universities are two poignant signs of hopelessness among many Americans. Ironically, incapacitating anxiety and suicidal ideation are prevalent among those who would seem to have the most reason to be hopeful about their future (e.g., students at prestigious universities). Such widespread despair might also seem strange given the fact that, in many regards, many people in the world are enjoying unprecedented prosperity and peace. It is perhaps not incidental (as Charles Taylor and others have argued) that these disconcerting trends have coincided with a large-scale drift away from institutional religions, the long-time houses of meaning.

Still, many people continue to find that the world’s great religious traditions illuminate the meaningfulness of their lives and believe that these traditions may do likewise for others. As such, religious educators have an important role to play in helping contemporary persons to recover hope. In a milieu characterized by radical plurality and fragmentation, this role crucially involves helping people to cultivate, on the one hand, a resilient sense of identity and purpose and, on the other, an openness to diversity and evolving relationships.

How can religious educators accomplish this work? The metaphor of the teacher as “coach” or “trainer” is a suggestive one with particular potential for the present era. Pope Paul VI spoke well when he said, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” Today many people are wary of traditional authority figures and of being told what they should do and believe. Nonetheless, they yearn for a sense of clarity and purpose in their lives. For that reason they are attracted to those “authentic” individuals who confidently pursue a clear vision and can show them “how it’s done.” In fact, religious traditions like Christianity—the tradition out of which I speak—offer such a vision and way of life, and, when done best, efforts to hand on the faith focus on
cultivating a vision and particular set of habits or practices. Just as an athletic trainer shows the trainee what excellence looks like for a soccer player or gymnast and leads her in practicing the skills that foster this excellence, so too do effective religious educators present learners with a meaningful vision of reality and guide them in the practices that enable one to participate in reality so envisioned. In sum, given the pervasive sense of meaninglessness afflicting many people today, what the world needs today even more than doctrinal experts are coaches of religious imagination and practices.

In this poster presentation, I will develop this suggestive metaphor by exploring the cognitive underpinnings of the link between imaginative vision, habits, and sense of purpose, proposing resources for cultivating this model of religious education, and offering concrete examples of what it looks like in practice.

**Research Question and Methodology**
In line with this year’s call for papers, this project flows from two questions: First, what is the professional role of the educator/teacher in fostering identity, celebrating diversity, and building community? Second, what can we learn from other disciplines (in this case cognitive science and advertising) about the role of the educator/teacher? I address these questions by drawing upon research literature in these fields as well as my own praxis and that of other notable religious educators.

**Underlying Theories and Sources**
My approach to this topic is informed by research in the field of cognitive science, especially the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, and by theories of effective advertising, including those of Paul Messaris. In the field of religious education, I draw primarily upon the work of Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass on Christian practices and of James Smith on religious imagination.