Making the Familiar Strange: The Sociological Imagination and Religious Education

In the mid-20th century the concept of sociological imagination, coined by C. Wright Mills, created a significant and lasting shift within sociological engagement with the world. To employ the sociological imagination one must “make the familiar strange” whereby everyday experiences are seen as parts of larger social structures. This paper examines the use of sociological imagination as a framework to engage in religious education for social change and asks whether or not a more robust employment of the sociological imagination is warranted within children’s religious education. I will offer places of overlap and tension between sociological imagination and religious education.

Main points or a summary of the argument or analysis that will be presented;

This paper will ask the question of whether or not a more robust employment of the sociological imagination is warranted within children’s religious education. I will begin by offering a brief review of C. Wright Mills and critiques of the sociological imagination since its introduction. These critiques include potential colonialistic bias, and the way concepts of Intersectionality might strengthen and expand the understanding of the sociological imagination today.

I will then explore how the sociological imagination is already in use in select children’s religious education curricula. Many of the core theoretical components such as fostering the ability to make connections with broader social issues and understanding texts and issues from perspectives other than one’s own are present in many children’s religious education curricula goals.

Finally, I will argue that if one of the purposes of religious education is to equip participants with tools to critically engage with the world of religion in ways that allow them to enact their faith/spirituality in the world a critical and intentional use of the sociological imagination used in developmentally appropriate ways can provide a key link between religious education and the formation of social change agents rooted in their religious and spiritual tradition.

Description of methodology

This study draws a content analysis of children’s religious education curricula focused on social justice and world religions read through a conceptual analysis of the sociological imagination and the relationship between religious education and social change.

Selected Bibliography


In ( ) sociologist C. Wright Mills sought to correct what he saw was a major failure within the social sciences. The research and theory was resulting in the “bureaucratization of reason and of discourse.” Removed from the issues and struggles of communities, he saw the social sciences becoming unable to make significant and meaningful change. As an alternative, Mills introduced the term sociological imagination. Sociological imagination is a way of viewing the world with a lens that links micro- or personal level acts with macro- or systemic level society. Mills’ work assumed that individuals could not be understood outside of their social and cultural contexts. In order for social change to occur, individuals must employ the sociological imagination in which they “make the familiar strange.” In doing so everyday experiences are seen afresh as more than simple acts but parts of larger social structures. At the heart of the sociological imagination is the ability to see the world from the perspective of another.
The sociological imagination created a significant and lasting shift within sociological engagement with the world. This paper examines the use of sociological imagination as a framework to engage in religious education for social change. Many of the core theoretical components of the sociological imagination such as fostering the ability to make connections with broader social issues and understanding texts and issues from perspectives other than one’s own are present in many children’s religious education curricula goals. This paper will ask the question of whether or not a more robust employment of the sociological imagination is warranted within children’s religious education. After a brief review of C. Wright Mills and critiques of the sociological imagination, I will offer places of overlap and tension between sociological imagination and religious education.

Critique of the role of rationalization and how it limits our application of the sociological imagination

How does the notion of the sociological imagination inform the work of religious educators? What does engagement with sociological imagination look like at the various developmental stages? Might drawing on sociology better inform the way we structure and engage children? What biases does this method hold?

What is it that we are doing when we are asking students to make links between a story and the world? What are we doing when we ask them to think bigger than themselves? We introduce them to stories about children in other contexts and historical figures and ask them to make links.