

Thomas Groome and the Intersection of Narrative and Action: Praxis, Dialectic and Hermeneutics

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Abstract: Groome's (1976, 1977, 1980, 1991) "shared Christian praxis" provides a conceptual construct to occasion the intersection of narrative and action. This is achieved through "a dialectical hermeneutic", wherein critical reflection on present praxis and the Christian Story/Vision provides impetus for renewed praxis. This paper traces the philosophical origins of Groome's conceptual construct in order to explain the way in which the intersection of narrative and action is facilitated. In so doing, exploration is made of key concepts of the praxis construct such as: the nature of knowing, dialectical hermeneutics and shared Christian praxis. An outline of the pedagogical activities which facilitate the intersection of narrative and action is provided. This analysis concludes with an assessment of Groome's contribution and its relevance for the continuing practical endeavour of Christian religious education.

Key Words: Thomas Groome; shared Christian praxis; dialectical hermeneutic; Christian religious education; Christian Story/ Vision

In a world of dynamic social, cultural, economic and political changes, relating the Christian faith to practical everyday experience remains one of the challenges for contemporary Christian religious education. The relevance and appropriation of the Christian faith to personal and corporate living action in the present-day world requires an approach that will mediate the truth of the faith for immediate everyday experience and action. Although its formulation began in the 1970s, Thomas Groome's "shared Christian praxis" remains a challenging formulation of Christian religious educational theory and practice because of its relevance in addressing contemporary sociological, anthropological, educational, philosophical and theological issues arising in the current practice of Christian religious education. Groome's shared Christian praxis is constructed with the purpose to facilitate a dynamic interaction between present-day action and the Christian Story/Vision¹ so as to engender action authentic to Christian faith.² This

¹ Story (capitalised) includes the Christian Scriptures and tradition. Vision (capitalised) is the "lived response" to the Story. T.H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 191-193; cf. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education & Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 138-140.

² Although an extensive and balanced assessment and critique is beyond the scope of this paper, it would seem that Groome aims to address issues similar to those raised by Lovat in regard to "Practical Mysticism." T.J. Lovat, "Practical Mysticism as Authentic Religiousness: A Bonhoeffer Case Study," *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 6 (2006). http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_6/lovat.htm. Retrieved 4 July 2006.

“theory/method”³ is multifaceted and draws on a wide range of social and anthropological theory, educational theory and practice, philosophical thought, and theological understanding and insight. Of interest to this present analysis is Groome’s praxis construct designed to occasion the intersection of narrative and action to empower renewed action consciously and deliberately chosen. Although the analysis provided in this study touches on major elements of Groome’s thought, a more complete discussion would need to explore more deeply the relation of praxis and ontology, the interrelation of Divine revelation and praxis, and the role of imagination in praxis.⁴

In line with the Aristotelian concepts of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and knowing in the Christian scriptures, knowing in Groome’s praxis construct is inseparable from a practical outworking as implicit in the very notion of praxis. Shared Christian praxis is energised by the dialectical intersection of narrative and action, where practical knowing arises from the critical reflection impelling this dialectic. Hillis observes that in Groome’s approach to narrative, “narrative traditions” are contained “within an overarching critical construct.”⁵ Groome regards Story as including narrative.⁶ Discourse, however, is facilitated by “a narrative/practical language pattern”, as participants relate their present action, and engage with Christian Story/Vision.⁷ Groome justifies the linking of narrative with praxis (and hence action),⁸ by reference to Gerkin⁹ and Metz.¹⁰ Gerkin perceives narrative as the means by which we make meaning from our experience of the world:

... praxis...always involves an essentially narrative structure...

By means of stories of the self and the world around us we hold together events, persons, and experiences that would otherwise be fragmented. To be a person is therefore to live in a story.¹¹

Metz (1980) understands narrative to be central to the identity of Christianity:

My criticism...is principally directed against the attempt to explain the historical identity of Christianity by means of speculative thought (idealism), without regard to the constitutive function of Christian praxis, the cognitive equivalent of which is narrative and memory.¹²

Hence, Groome maintains that a narrative and practical discourse pattern provides the common currency for the intersection of the Christian Story with present action or praxis and that the dynamics and form of such a discourse are engendered by the critical and pedagogical construct of shared Christian praxis.

³ “Theory/method” is used to emphasise the unity between theory and method in line with Groome’s definition of praxis. T.H. Groome, “The Crossroads: A Story of Christian Education by Shared Praxis,” *Lumen Vitae* 32.1 (2007): 45 n.3.

⁴ N.D. Clement, “A Praxis Approach to Learning: Epistemological Implications for Religious Education in a Christian Context,” (PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, 2004).

⁵ M. Hillis, “Roles of Narrative in Religious Education – An Open-Ended Story of Discovery in Theory and Experience” (MEd thesis, University of Newcastle, 2003), 77.

⁶ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 191.

⁷ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 109, 140-141.

⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 109, 141]

⁹ C.V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

¹⁰ J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. D. Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

¹¹ Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, 52.

¹² Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 161.

Dialectic

The notion of dialectic which impels Groome's praxis construct is eclectic in nature, has Hegelian overtones, and is set within an existentialist ontology influenced by Heidegger. The three moments of Hegel's dialectic comprise the positing of an idea, its negation from contradictions arising from within and inherent to the idea, and then the subsuming of the insights of the first and second moments into a synthesis. Unlike Marx, however, Groome does not conceive the second moment as "inevitable negation", but can be an "alternate perspective" which "with dialogue can be a moment of peace rather than conflict.¹³ Emphasis is placed on the potential of the dialectic as creative resolution through dialogue rather than conflictual negative aspects:

There are three aspects to a dialectical moment: one of affirming, giving assent, or accepting; an aspect of questioning and possibly of refusing or negating; and a "moving beyond" that subsumes the first two moments in a new realization of "being."¹⁴

In Groome's praxis construct dialectic is operative in several ways and is integral to his understanding of the ontic self. Dialectical interaction exists between self and the socio-cultural context which shapes self-identity and this dialectic is to be encouraged in Christian education.¹⁵ Then there is the dialectic between participants' stories/vision and the community's Story/Vision, that is, the "dialectical hermeneutics" to be consciously promoted by educators.¹⁶ The defining dimension of this dialectic is its resolution by critical reflection facilitated through dialogue: it is a shared praxis, an act of community. Groome's notion of dialectic is one that permeates his whole methodology and, in particular, his construction of praxis. Concepts are drawn from diverse philosophers and theologians, but in the end Groome's praxis construct is his own by virtue of his affirmation and refusal of the various theories, and their subsumption into his theological and pedagogical purpose of Christian religious education.

The Praxis Construct

Shared Christian praxis stands within the scholastic tradition, drawing both on theological and philosophical insight. Groome argues that knowing in the Old and New Testaments has historical, experiential, reflective and relational dimensions, with knowing focusing on the activity of God. Knowing God finds practical expression in loving, obeying and believing. Reflecting on the activity of God in present experience includes remembering and retelling the Story of faith from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and of Christians who have lived before us.¹⁷ This is extended to the Wisdom tradition of the Bible in Sharing Faith. Wisdom intertwines reflection and action in engaging and shaping of life with respect to a person's "identity and agency" and this requires reflection on one's life, and Scripture and Tradition, as well as dialogue within a "wisdom community."¹⁸ Groome thus argues for a conceptual convergence on the practical nature of knowing between the knowing of the Bible and the notion of praxis with its roots in Aristotelian thought.

Groome's philosophical construction of praxis draws selectively from aspects of the thought of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Habermas and Freire. While Gadamer's hermeneutical

¹³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 475 n.38.

¹⁴ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 101; cf. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 196.

¹⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 113-114, 121-126; Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 100-104.

¹⁶ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 195-197; Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 122-123, 143-145.

¹⁷ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 141-145.

¹⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 30-32.

approach does not receive the same detailed analysis, nonetheless the conceptualisation of praxis construct, particularly in its practical functioning, displays the profound influence of concepts arising from Gadamer through the notions of “open horizon”, “dialectical hermeneutics” and “appropriation.”¹⁹ Groome attempts a fine balance between the critical stance of Marx, Habermas and Freire and the hermeneutical undertaking of Gadamer.

Aristotle’s concept of praxis as a deliberative activity which implements practical wisdom or prudence (*phronesis*) in particular circumstances of social reality is where Groome begins his construction of praxis. Such deliberation encompasses both reason and emotion as indicated by the word *proaireis* or “deliberate choice”. Praxis is understood as a “dialectical unity” of theory and practice where there is reciprocal movement between “action done reflectively, and reflection on what is being done.”²⁰ Groome subsumes within his praxis construct Aristotle’s two other dimensions of knowing: theory (*theoria*) and making or production (*poiesis*). From *theoria* Groome embraces the “contemplative aspect of rational activity” but draws attention to the distinction between the Christian contemplation of God’s activity in the world and Aristotelian contemplation of removal from the world for introspection on the eternal.²¹ Groome incorporates the imaginative, productive and creative aspects of *poiesis* into praxis, with the three different pursuits of *theoria*, praxis and *poiesis* being woven “in a symbiotic unity.”²² Each of these represents a particular dimension of Groome’s pedagogical construct:

[T]he “theoretical” dimension is reflected in at least three ways: by contemplative activity to discern God’s self-disclosure in present reality; by critical reasoning on people’s own “being” in time and place and on the meaning of the Christian faith for the present; and by narrative activity that goes beyond Aristotle’s dehistoricized notion of *theoria* and makes accessible the practical wisdom from God’s revelation to this community over time—Christian “Story”. The pedagogy is “practical” in that it arises from, engages, and intends to shape people’s “being” in time and place... The “creative” dimension is honored by attending to people’s historical visions and to the Vision of God’s reign by enlivening their imaginations and empowering their wills to be co-creators of it now.²³

By proposing this expanded Aristotelian notion of praxis, Groome is affirming that praxis includes the full range of intellectual powers and this appropriation removes any division between the practical domain and productive activity. In opting for this particular reconstruction of knowing in Aristotle, Groome, perhaps with the influence of Habermas,²⁴ affirms the unity of knowing by acknowledging that knowing cannot be restricted to a narrow definition, because knowing arises from engagement in and reflection on the whole of life and its experiences and activities.

Moving from Aristotle to Hegel, Groome educes two points for his understanding of praxis. Firstly, knowing begins with praxis and not *theoria*: knowing arises from consciousness of life’s praxis through reflection. Secondly, the separation of theory and practice is a false dichotomy, because together they are a “fundamental unity”. Praxis is the self-actualisation of Geist, and *theoria* is the “human consciousness of the rational ingredient in Geist’s self-actualizing.” This transpires into educational practice in a

¹⁹ H. Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” *Continuum*, 8.1-2 (1970): 77-95; H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²⁰ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 153-157.

²¹ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 459 n.22.

²² Groome, *Sharing Faith*, pp. 42-49, 459 n. 22; Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 156-157.

²³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 48, cf. 136-137.

²⁴ J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

dialectical unity between “lived experience and the consciousness that has arisen from lived experience in previous generations.”²⁵ From Marx, Groome gleans the insight “that human knowing is an expression of historical human praxis.” Further, with the unity between theory and praxis, theory informs further praxis to transform reality for emancipation, demanding “initiative and creativity, reflection and intuition” (pp. 166-168).

Habermas²⁶ is significant in Groome’s construction of praxis because, although the notion of critical reflection is present in the philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, Habermas provides a philosophical link between critical reflection and human emancipation, and this strikes a chord with Groome’s understanding of human freedom as part of the purpose of Christian religious education. For Habermas, knowing is constituted by human interest in the human dispositions of production (the empirical-analytical interest), self-interest (the historical-hermeneutical interest) and emancipation (the critical-reflective interest). Each of these three interests represents action in the world, and within each interest is unity of theory and practice. Groome appropriates Habermas’ concept of knowledge-constitutive interests to his application of dialectical hermeneutics which mediate his application of praxis in his pedagogical approach. People become aware of their “constitutive knowing” as they critically reflect on their experience in the world and, thus, “know and name their own story and vision”. Unity of theory and practice is maintained by placing this “self-constituted knowing” and the Christian Story and Vision in “a dialectical hermeneutic”.

Habermas extends the active moment of praxis beyond labour (as in Marx), to include “all intentional human activity, be it instrumental, interpretive or critical”. The importance of critique for the knowing subject is re-established, by Habermas, whether it be socio-political or self-reflective, and such critical reflectivity is in order to release people from the control of “distorted communication” and “repressed dialogue” in order to occasion genuine dialogue or “communicative competence”. Critique is extended beyond the economic system to “the whole symbol system by which the world is mediated to us” with human emancipation being made possible “when the reflective moment of praxis is truly critical”. While Groome sees praxis as serving the emancipatory purpose of Christian religious education, he critiques Habermas according to the underlying theological purpose: Habermas’ reflective moment “may be emancipatory” with the gift of “the enlightening Spirit and God’s grace of discernment”.

Thus, three key aspects of Habermas’ thought are pressed into the service of Christian pedagogy by Groome: knowledge-constitutive interests, critical self-reflectivity as enabling human freedom, and unimpeded dialogue. However, in line with Gadamer, Groome rejects what he perceives as the position of Habermas in accepting the Enlightenment’s rejection of tradition and holding reason to be the sole source of authority. Groome disputes Habermas’ position that the consequence and interest of all hermeneutics is practical control, and favours Gadamer’s position that hermeneutical activity can be emancipatory in breaking the bondage of practical control when it “is dialectical and poses an open horizon for tradition.”²⁷

Freire provides the inspiration for Groome’s application of praxis to Christian religious education. Groome identifies with Freire’s view “that education is to be an

²⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 164.

²⁶ Habermas, *Knowledge and human interests*; J. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

²⁷ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 169-175.

exercise in freedom". This is achieved through critical reflection on present reality as opposed to the "banking method" of education. People's consciousness of their world and their place within it is raised through participation in and reflection upon their historical praxis with a view towards changing their world through transformative praxis. The role of the teacher is being "with" and not "over" people and education provides a means of human freedom via a problem-solving approach and in dialogue with people, helping them to name their world. The perceived limitations of Freire are the lack of an explicit statement of the meaning of praxis and, as with Habermas, a perceived over-emphasis on the present and future to the forgetting of the past.²⁸

Shared Christian Praxis

The overview of Groome's particular reconstruction of praxis provided above demonstrates the way he engages dialectic in tailoring philosophical insights to theological and pedagogical ends. Groome's endeavour is essentially a theological one as can be seen from his definition of shared Christian praxis:

"[S]hared Christian praxis" is a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their sociocultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate it in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith toward God's reign for all creation.²⁹

Groome uses the term "epistemic ontology" to convey the notion that knowing is endemic to the way that people exist and interrelate as they live as historical beings in the world, and the aim of religious education is the honouring and empowering of people in their "identity and agency in the world."³⁰ Accordingly, praxis is defined in terms of epistemic ontology and this reflects Groome's subsumption of the Aristotelian notions of *theoria* and *poiesis* into his understanding of praxis:

Praxis as the defining term of this pedagogical approach refers to the consciousness and agency that arise from and are expressed in any and every aspect of people's "being" as agent-subjects-in-relationship, whether realized in actions that are personal, interpersonal, sociopolitical, or cosmic.³¹

Each of the three words in the term "shared Christian praxis" have very specific meanings. Praxis has active, reflective and creative aspects. The active aspect includes "all corporeal, mental, and volitional activities" by which people realise themselves "as agent subjects in space and time." "Present action" has both personal and social dimensions. The personal dimension includes all that a person does or makes, and the interaction with the socio-cultural environment. Socially, it includes all that happens in the "public life" of the social context.³² In line with his adoption of Augustine's perception of time,³³ "present praxis" also includes the reflective aspect of critical reflection on the "consequences of the past and the possibilities for the future" within the present of people's social situation. Critical reflection on "present praxis" is engaging in "analytical and social remembering, critical and social reasoning, creative and social imagination". This critically reflective dialogue "can be identified as 'theoretical'" for it is an expressing and comprehending of "the

²⁸ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 175-177.

²⁹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 135.

³⁰ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 8.

³¹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 136.

³² Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 137.

³³ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 12-13; Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 110.

consciousness that emerges from their 'being' in the world". However, there is another aspect to the theoretical, the Christian community's accumulated "practical understanding and wisdom" through time.³⁴

The creative aspect permeates the active and reflective aspects: in the productive dimension of action and the "creative and social imagination" dimension of reflection. Further, it identifies the "impetus within praxis for ongoing praxis", and provides the "creative/ethical aspect" permeating the "theoretical, practical and productive expressions" of praxis.³⁵

Christian refers to the making accessible of the Christian Story and Vision emerging from the Christian community "in our time and over its history."³⁶ Story includes both Scripture and Tradition, it is in fact "the whole faith tradition of our people however that is expressed or embodied" and is grounded in the "Jesus of history". Vision is a metaphor for the "lived response" invited by the Story.³⁷ The Christian Story/Vision has three aspects: it is "historical and practical"; the "belonging and ownership" is with the people who share the story; and it is "engaging and dialogical."³⁸ The "historical and practical nature of the Christian faith" is made accessible and effectual in teaching through "the metaphors of Story and Vision and a narrative/practical language pattern". This reflects the faith tradition being "rooted in history" arising from the activity of God "among humankind" from the Israelite people, in the life of Jesus of history, in the Christian community through time and in shaping adherents of that faith now in their present reality. Citing Metz,³⁹ Groome pleads the case that the narrative mode is an "antidote" to the reduction of the Christian faith to metaphysical language and categories of theology, or the avoidance of its historical responsibilities. Groome says of a narrative pattern of discourse: "A narrative pattern of discourse conveys this sense of historicity and practicality: it reflects and teaches that Christianity is always about and for praxis."⁴⁰

Story and Vision are "egalitarian metaphors" that symbolise that the Story/Vision belongs to and is owned by "everyone in the community". The Story and Vision as engaging is "a mirror" of life reflecting our own life, a "remembrance of being" illuminating people's own "being", and through its invitation to reflection has the potential to shape people's "identity and agency". Story and Vision encourage dialogue with the reality represented by them.⁴¹

The word shared, in "shared Christian praxis", indicates both the mutuality of "partnership, participation" and "dialogue" in praxis, and "dialectical hermeneutics between 'praxis' and 'Christian'". Mutuality is present in two aspects of the process: the "communal dynamics" to take place within "a teaching/learning event"; and "the kind of dialogue and dialectic" encouraged between the "present praxis" of participants and the community Story/Vision. Groome stresses the desirability of a partnership between teacher and learner, where there is mutual responsibility for each other's learning, rather than a relationship which encourages dependency. Participation is involvement with regard to a person's learning preferences and capacities, rather than passivity. "Shared

³⁴ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 137.

³⁵ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 134-138.

³⁶ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 138.

³⁷ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 191-193; cf. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 138-140.

³⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, pp. 140-142.

³⁹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 161.

⁴⁰ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 141 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 141-142.

praxis” is to be structured so as to “foster dialogue and conversation with oneself, with others and with God.”⁴²

Dialectical Hermeneutics

The pedagogical strategies of shared Christian praxis are modelled on the three moments of dialectical hermeneutics between “praxis” and “Christian”: reflective cognisance of present praxis; making available the Christian Story/Vision; and the reflective dialogue between moments one and two resulting in transformed praxis. While the hermeneutical typology of Gadamer supports and sustains the structural conception of the pedagogy of shared Christian praxis, Groome attempts to interweave these critical insights into this hermeneutical construct. Also, the influence of liberation theology is reflected through the embedding of consciousness raising regarding present praxis and the Christian Story/Vision within Christian religious education.⁴³ The first moment of the dialectical hermeneutics of shared Christian praxis involves dialectical critical reflection on participants’ own and society’s “present praxis”. In the second moment, educators make available the Christian Story/Vision, interpreting and explaining it, in bringing to the endeavour “hermeneutics of retrieval, suspicion and creativity”. Moments one and two are placed in dialogue in the third moment of dialectical hermeneutics and Groome calls this “the moment of judgement and dialectical appropriation.”⁴⁴ There are four parts to the dialectical appropriation and they comprise two groupings: between present praxis and the Story, and between present praxis and the Vision. The two groupings and four parts may be summarised thus:

“Dialectic between present praxis and the Christian Story”

Part 1, Story to present, the Story becomes a source to critique present praxis. “What does the Story say to our present praxis?”

Part 2, present praxis to Story raises the question, “What does present praxis do to and ask of the Story?” It is a claiming of the dimensions of the present Story “reclaimed as of value and lasting truth”, and refusing of undesirable aspects of the Story (e.g. discrimination against women and legitimization of slavery).

“Dialectic between present praxis and the Christian Vision”

Part 3, Vision to present, “the vision functions as a measure of our present praxis” enabling discernment of that which can be affirmed and of that which is limiting in “present praxis”, and also, calls people “to a Christian praxis more creative of the Kingdom and more faithful to God’s invitation”.

Part 4, present praxis to Vision, calls forth intentionality in decision making “appropriate to the reign of God”. It is not the Kingdom as promise to the present, but as Vision which as knowing shapes the future.⁴⁵

Dialectical hermeneutics provides the theoretical construct occasioning the intersection of action and narrative with a view to transformed Christian praxis. The narrative of the Christian Story/Vision intersects with people’s narratives arising from their critical reflection on their present praxis, and this intersection of narrative and praxis is seen as

⁴² Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 142-145.

⁴³ T.H. Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, Texas: Thomas More, 1998).

⁴⁴ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 142-145.

⁴⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 196-197.

having the potential to change their understanding of who they are and of the way they act and interact in the world. Groome proposes the practical implementation of dialectical hermeneutics through a series of pedagogical activities designed wherein the present action of participants intersects with the Christian Story/Vision in narrative form.

Activities of Shared Christian Praxis

Shared Christian praxis is implemented through five activities which Groome calls “movements” because they are employed flexibly and not as a locked-step approach. The metaphor of symphony and dance conveys the notion that the movements can be combined variously and fluidly with overlap to meet the needs of each particular pedagogical situation.⁴⁶ The following list of activities of shared Christian praxis follows expression in *Sharing Faith*:⁴⁷

Focusing Activity

- Movement 1 Naming/Expressing “Present Action”
- Movement 2 Critical Reflection on Present Action
- Movement 3 Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision
- Movement 4 Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants’ Stories and Visions
- Movement 5 Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith

Through these activities Groome orchestrates a pedagogy to enable the intersection of story and action. The following is a brief overview of each of the activities.

The purpose of the Sharing Activity is to establish a “shared focus” for the curriculum by turning people to an aspect of “their present praxis”, “to their own ‘being’ in place and time” so as to engage their interest. This activity is compared with Freire’s “generative theme” and Sophia Cavalletti’s “linking point.”⁴⁸

Movement 1, Naming/Expressing “Present Action”, has the intent of facilitating the naming or expressing of some aspect of participants’ or society’s “present praxis”. It is bringing “their conscious and historical engagement with a generative theme” which can be expressed through a variety of means.⁴⁹

Movement 2, Critical Reflection on Present Action, encourages “critical reflection” on the “present praxis” named and expressed in movement 1. The “critical reflection” entails bringing to “critical consciousness” the “present praxis” through critical and creative hermeneutics: “critical social reasoning”, that is, the uncovering of “reasons, assumptions, prejudices, and ideologies”; “analytical and social remembering”, that is, the “socio-historical and biographical sources” of “present praxis”; and “creative and social imagining”, for “intended, likely and preferred consequences”. The substance of the

⁴⁶ Groome, *The Crossroads*; Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 207-208, 231-232 n. 1; Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146, 279-281.

⁴⁷ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146-148.

⁴⁸ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146, 155ff.

⁴⁹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146-147, 175ff.

dialogue in movement 2 is characterised as being the stories and visions of the participants.⁵⁰

Movement 3, Making Accessible Christian Story and Vision, makes accessible the Christian Story and Vision as it relates to the generative theme. The Story is a symbol of the Christian community's life and faith, and the Vision which arises from the "promises and demands" of the Story empowers and mandates "historical agency towards God's reign". Groome provides hermeneutical guidelines for the guidance of educators in presenting the Christian Story/Vision.⁵¹

In movement 4, Dialectical Hermeneutics to Appropriate Story/Vision to Participants' Stories and Visions, the critical understanding of the "present praxis" constructed in movements 1 and 2 is placed in "dialectical hermeneutics" with the Christian Story/Vision presented in movement 3. The Story/Vision of the faith community is critically appropriated by participants into their own existential situations, and this is understood in the analogous ideas of Lonergan's concept of judgement, Piaget's notion of equilibration, and Gadamer's "fusion of horizons". The philosophical rationale for this movement is by reference to Gadamer.⁵²

Movement 5, Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith, provides opportunities for decision making for living the Christian faith. Groome suggests these decisions are of two types: "what to do" and "who to become". The appropriateness of those decisions is determined by guidelines which are listed below. Groome notes the need for "a 'sixth' movement—living the decisions made", in other words, the movement is incomplete until it is enacted practically.⁵³

The five movements clearly reflect the three moments of dialectical hermeneutics:

Moment one	Movements 1 and 2 are to engage "present praxis"
Moment two	Movement 3, engages "theoria", the "wisdom and traditions" of the faith community, that is, the Christian Story/Vision
Moment three	In movements 4 and 5 the "two sources of wisdom", from the first two moments are held together in dialectical hermeneutics for "appropriation (movement 4) and decision (movement 5)" which is "a creative relationship (poiesis) to promote renewed praxis." ⁵⁴

Groome provides three guidelines for shared praxis groups "to guide their discernment and decision making". Firstly, there are questions concerning the appropriateness of the decisions to the Kingdom or God, that is: "is the envisioned response creative of the freedom, peace, justice, and wholeness that are essential to God's kingdom?" Secondly, there is the issue of continuity between the decisions of a shared praxis group and the

⁵⁰ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 147, 187ff.

⁵¹ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 147, 215ff.

⁵² Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 147, 249ff.; cf. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 182 n.70, 203-204 nn. 23, 24.

⁵³ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 148, 266ff.

⁵⁴ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 217-218.

Christian Story or tradition. Thirdly, the discernment made in a shared praxis group is to be informed by the teaching of the whole church.⁵⁵

A Concluding Perspective

When Groome's concept of shared Christian praxis first appeared, it was seen to be groundbreaking in bringing insights from contemporary educational disciplines, philosophy, and theology to bear on Christian religious education.⁵⁶ Groome was also among the forerunners in the application of the hermeneutic to the broader discipline of practical theology.⁵⁷ The significance of Groome's contribution is that it has stood the test of time and issues addressed by him remain current in the contemporary educational scene. His subsuming of the Aristotelian designations of the practical and the poetic/productive into his concept of praxis is relevant to the current debate as to whether teaching is *phronesis/praxis* or *techne/poiesis*.⁵⁸

The analysis of shared Christian praxis has demonstrated its eclectic nature, and the question arises as to whether Groome's dialectic has successfully synthesised diverse and sometimes contradictory sources of thought. A pertinent example is: does the subsuming of Habermas' critical epistemology into a Gadamer-like hermeneutic create an uneasy tension? Perhaps, the presence of such tension has given rise to critique like that of Lovat⁵⁹ and of Raduntz⁶⁰ who perceive a blunting of a truly critical thrust in Groome's praxis construct. On a similar note, Raduntz and Steinhoff-Smith⁶¹ raise the question of equality of power relations with the perceived deferment of participants to the teaching of the church (Raduntz) or the privileged position of the hermeneute (SteinhoffSmith). On a different tack, while affirming Groome's use of narrative in religious education, Hillis raises the question of whether Groome's "overarching critical construct" impairs the "performative potential" of narrative.⁶² Wallace sees the critical emphasis as possibly endangering the balance "between personal, propositional and practical dimensions of

⁵⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 199-201; Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 237-239.

⁵⁶ T.J. Lovat, "Action Research and the Praxis Model of Religious Education: A Critique," *British Journal of Religious Education*, 11.1 (1988): 30-37; T.J. Lovat, "A History and Critique of Critical Religious Education in Catholic Schools," in H. Raduntz (ed.), *Potential and opportunity: Critical Issues for Australian Catholic Education into the 21st Century* (Blackwood: Auslib, 1995), 177-189; T.J. Lovat, *What is This Thing Called Religious Education?: A Decade On*, 2nd ed. (Wentworth Falls: Social Sciences, 2002).

⁵⁷ H. Steinhoff Smith, "Dialogue: Hermeneutic and Practical," *Pastoral Psychology* 45.6 (1997): 439-449.

⁵⁸ e.g. D. Carr, "Personal and Interpersonal Relationships in Education and Teaching: A Virtue Ethical Perspective," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 53.3 (2005): 255-271; D. Carr, "Professional and Personal Values and Virtues in Teaching," *Oxford Review of Education* 32.2 (2006); J. Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993); J. Dunne, "Arguing for Teaching as a Practice: A Reply to Alasdair MacIntyre," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37.2 (2003): 353-369; E.W. Eisner, "From Episteme to Phronesis to Artistry in the Study and Improvement of Teaching," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 18.4 (2002): 375-385; K. Kristjánsson, "Smoothing It: Some Aristotelian Misgivings about the Phronesis-Praxis Perspective on Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37.4 (2005): 455-473; G. Squires, "Praxis: A Dissenting Note," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35.1 (2003): 1-7.

⁵⁹ Lovat, "Action Research," 30-37; Lovat, "A history and critique," 177-189; Lovat, "What is this thing called religious education."

⁶⁰ H.T. Raduntz, "Shared Praxis Approach to Christian Religious Education: Why is it not so Critical?," in H. T. Raduntz (ed.), *Potential and Opportunity: Critical Issues for Australian Catholic Education into the 21st Century* (Blackwood: Auslib, 1995), 191-203.

⁶¹ Steinhoff Smith, "Dialogue: Hermeneutic and Practical," 439-449.

⁶² Hillis, "Roles of Narrative in Religious Education," 77.

Christian knowing.”⁶³ He sees the need for the activities to include a greater emphasis on “prayer, meditation and liturgy” and strengthening of the practical dimension.⁶⁴ It would be anomalous to expect that a pedagogical model which advocated critical reflection be placed above what it itself advocates, or that the pedagogy be applied uncritically or without dialogue.

The intersection of story and action in Groome’s shared Christian praxis is intended to provide the crucible for a critical reflective activity leading to a knowing that results in transformed praxis. The praxis construct depends on reflective critical activity in the analysis of participants of their own “present praxis”. Groome emphasises the centrality of “dialectical hermeneutics” for the intentional creation of dialectical unity between “present praxis” and the Story/Vision to maintain the unity of theory and praxis.⁶⁵ A critical construct resonant with the conceptual framework of theory as arising from reflection on action would affirm that knowing arises from critical reflection on “present praxis” and the Christian Story/Vision. The issue of the practical outworking of Christian spirituality and faith continues to be relevant. Groome has engaged with contemporary educational theory and practice, philosophy and theology to propose a pedagogy that provides a means of readdressing an issue that has re-emerged for every generation throughout the history of the Christian faith: the question of how the faith is to be given practical, tangible expression, or what is appropriate praxis in the immediate cultural, social, philosophical and political environment.

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Clement, N. D. “An Historical and Conceptual Analysis of the Christian Life Curriculum.” MEdStud minor thesis, University of Newcastle, 1999.

Clement, N. D. “Ways We Learn: Understanding Learning Preferences.” In M. Hillis (ed.), Teacher’s Pet: Encouragement for Religious Education Teachers. Melbourne: JBCE, 1995.

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⁶³ T.R.Wallace, “Christian Knowledge and Wisdom: Paul and Contemporary Theorists in Christian Education,” (PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, 1995).

⁶⁴ Wallace, “Christian Knowledge and Wisdom,” 180-189

⁶⁵ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 195.