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Boundary-Breaking Disposition against Post-Truth: Five Big Questions for Religious Education

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Abstract: This paper articulates how religious education can broaden our perspective on *post-truth* from simply an issue of critical reading to a philosophical challenge involving larger issues such as our sense of self, perception of others, and grounding of justice. Pointing out that the root cause of post-truth is our parochial, defensive sense of self and community, which premises a *boundary-drawing/building mindset*, the author suggests *the feeling of transcendence* as an intellectual, psychological, and spiritual ground to cultivate a counterforce, which is *the boundary-breaking disposition*. This rationale is developed particularly by the discussion of the Five Big Questions that the author has been using for his Introduction to Religion course: *Ultimate Meaning*, *Transcendence*, *Personal Identity*, *Vocation*, and *Service*.

Keywords: religious education; post-truth; introduction to religion; meaning of life

1. Introduction

It is extremely hard to prevent media misrepresentation and the spread of unverified content on the Internet because we are not just recipients of pure facts but often prisoners in the cave of manufactured facts. The World Economic Forum called this threat "digital wildfire" in 2013. Additionally, the unprecedented scale and speed of information creation and transmission in this hyper-connected digital world has intensified this threat. We created more data in 2017 than the past 5000 years of humanity. According to Levitin, author of *The Organized Mind*, we are living in "an age of information overload (O'Kelly 2015)" The Oxford Dictionary recognized this global problem by declaring "*Post-Truth*" the 2016 word of the year. Leaders from a variety of intellectual communities, including CEOs of tech companies, journalists, and Internet activists, are realizing the devastating impact of fake news and disinformation on public trust in the media and social solidarity. They are taking numerous measures to fight back against the *post-truth* phenomena. Education is obviously on the frontline, calling attention to the urgency of teaching critical thinking and media literacy.

Like other educational fields, religious education has a lot to offer. It has recently made a huge comeback in American higher education. Questions and issues that religious education covers are relevant and meaningful in this battle because it deals with what other measures might have overlooked. It asks second-order questions while most other academic disciplines focus on the first-order task of scientific inquiry. The second-order questions here mean big questions of life, which may sound abstract and unpractical on the outside, but they can be very effective in striving to identify the fundamental cause of *post-truth*. These questions are about the grounding and axiology of *post-truth*, not necessarily about logical validity and veracity of various truth claims. I believe that our parochial, defensive sense of self and community is the main problem because we tend selectively to choose facts, information, and claims that are felt and believed to benefit us and our community, which assumes a

boundary-drawing/building.[1] In this paper, I will articulate how religious education can broaden the problem of *post-truth* from simply an issue of critical reading to a philosophical challenge involving larger issues such as our sense of self, perception of others, and grounding of justice. To make my discussion productive in this limited space, I will specifically use one of my religion courses as a showcase. In particular, the Five Big Questions used in my Introduction to Religion course (RELI101) will be the focal point, and they will present a roadmap to cultivate a *boundary-breaking disposition*.

2. Problem of the Grounding of Post-Truth

Prior to the discussion on the Five Big Questions, it seems worth asking questions about the grounding of *post-truth* and their axiological implications because there are complex multilayered causes at play: What is the root cause? Are the triggering factors and their grounding solely political? What goals or values do people intend to achieve when adopting a *post-truth* stance? What harm would it cause to our community? Since the scientific revolution, facts have been highly regarded for our rational judgment. U.S. President John Adams confirmed this truth by stating, "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." (John Adams Historical Society 2018) In one of his encyclicals, John Paul II also said, according to Chaput's paraphrase, "Truth exists, whether we like it or not. We don't create truth; we find it, and we have no power to change it to our tastes (Chaput 2017)." However, Kellyanne Conway's alternative facts made this faith look naïve and outdated. Truth is something that can serve our interests, something that is aligned with the values we care, or something that can justify a course of action geared to our favor. Thus, the ground of this *post-truth* problem seems to be, at least on the surface, built by irrational and uncritical understanding and utilization of facts. Thus, the lack of correct information or knowledge and critical thinking skills is mainly to blame.

However, I believe that there is a more fundamental problem, which is underneath the socio-political surface. The problem is neither the lack of critical thinking nor the absence of goodwill. It is the lack of the ability to discern the type of truth on which we struggle and to build the disposition that the new world is demanding. The aspect of truth over which we are divided is not facts per se, which are observable and objectively measurable, but their interpretation and application for the interest of each individual or group particularly in a hostile relationship. It is the parochial sense of self and community that causes the *post-truth* world. For instance, the *post-truth* world emerges when the world suffers an extreme power struggle between the supposed "*establishment*" and the supposed "*populists*." (Democracy International 2017) It usually emerges when an interpreter of a community does not communicate and collaborate with interpreters of other communities. Economic indicators and any numerical data on people and society can be interpreted very differently by accountants, statisticians, economists, and politicians. Scientists are subject to the temptation of cooking data to win government grants and corporate funding. Major news sources in America also suffer political polarization. The left-leaning media outlets include New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, and Mother Jones while Fox News, the Blaze, and Drudge Report represent the right end of the spectrum. Even academics are no exception. They are ironically the ones that might have laid the groundwork for the *post-truth* worldview, although unintentionally. Since the emergence of existentialism out of a breakdown of traditional systems and ideas after the world wars, belief in objective reality and absolute truth claims, particularly in political discourses, have been habitually challenged by liberal academics. They are often biased toward their special agendas and peer groups. It all comes down to our *boundary-drawing-mindset* and our defensive mode of view on *the other* side of the territory. In all of our social life, we tend to find security through a stable or fixed set of beliefs and thereby adopt a particular interpretation of the world. What does not fit in our existing system is perceived immediately as a threat rather than a catalyst for positive change.

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1 For some examples, see (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

I believe that a solution can come from a *boundary-breaking* or *boundary-transcending* disposition, which can be cultivated by an intellectual and ethical translation of *the feeling of transcendence*. Let me articulate it with an analogical reasoning, using two philosophical acts. One is Jacque Derrida's *differance* and the other Martin Buber's *I and It* relationship. These two concepts reflect a disposition that the highly interconnected, interdependent world of the 21st-century demands. Derrida invented the idea of *differance* to express the unlimited creativity of our interpretation, of the text, which was expanded and developed later into a philosophical grounding for his civic virtue of *absolute hospitality*. He encouraged us to see the problem of our belief in the objectively and uniformly understood text/reality and inspired us to work constantly to find better ways to respond to what might be considered unfamiliar and unacceptable (Anderson 2013, p. 65). An important implication of this philosophical attitude particularly for the problem of *post-truth* is the demand of intellectual flexibility and open-mindedness in all we do to make sense of our surroundings and get a better sense of order and belonging: The open-mindedness that Scheffler points out can liberate people from the dictates of authority and dogmatic adherence to dominant ideological views (Scheffler 1983). The idea of *differance* presupposes constant self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-transcendence, and it eventually challenges us to transcend our epistemic, political, and moral comfort zone.

Similarly, Martin Buber's notion of an *I and Thou* relationship can be a great insight to fight the parochialism of the *post-truth* world. While Derrida's *differance* offers an epistemological insight, Buber's thought makes us reflect on the quality of our relationship with the world. He challenges us to consider whether we are engaging in the *I and Thou* relationship or the *I and It* relationship. The world in *the I and It* relationship is just an inanimate object that exists only for our survival, success, and prosperity. The other or *It* is anything beyond myself or ourselves, that we experience: particularly something unnatural, abnormal, unorthodox, or heterogeneous. It is the object of my perception and interpretation. He said, "Every *It* is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others" (Buber 1958, p. 4). On the other hand, the world in the *I and Thou* relationship is a meaningful part of our ontological narrative. Just as a flower, in Kim Chun-Soo's poem, (꽃), which has been only a gesture, becomes a meaningful being at the moment when we call its name, *the other*, including other humans and nature, approaches to co-arise, co-exist, and co-prosper when we take them meaningfully. We embrace *the other* as an important part of our life. To sum up, Derrida and Buber emphasized epistemic flexibility and moral inclusiveness respectively, which I believe are important to cultivate the boundary-breaking disposition.

How can we then build this *boundary-breaking* disposition? The parochial sense of self and community, political factionalism, uncritical loyalty to the nation-state, and indifference and insensitivity to the suffering of *the other* are threatening human solidarity today. It is because of our lack of an ability to recognize *the feeling of transcendence* and to translate it in various life activities. The feeling of transcendence is an essential part of human existence. According to the Oxford Dictionary, transcendence is a feeling or desire to "exist or experience beyond the normal or physical level." Assuming that the transcendent feeling is a part of human nature, we all have a common inner drive to go beyond who we are, what we have, and where we belong (Onah 2009). This feeling or desire is internalized, developed, and actualized into various forms in our life. According to Albert Einstein, if this transcendent feeling is used to respond to our intellectual curiosity, it becomes science. If used for our aesthetic expressions, it becomes art. If used for our desire to "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods" and "formulate conceptions of a general order of existence," it becomes religion, according to Clifford Geertz; it becomes a "cosmic religious feeling," said Einstein (1939). This *feeling of transcendence* leads to a *boundary-breaking* spirit or attitude because it premises the will to overcome the limits of the individual self. Differing from the people swayed by *post-truth*, the self-transcendent individual constantly reflects and reexamines his place and reformulates his course of action. He is not manipulated by fake news of deceptive partisan media outlets, nor is he easily imprisoned in an echo chamber because he has been trained with the spirit of *differance* and the *I-and-Thou* worldview.

They bring creativity and flexibility in intellectuality, a deeper sense of the divine in spirituality, and a malleable sense of self and community in ontology and sociology respectively.

3. Five Big Questions against Post-Truth

I have pointed out that the root cause of the *post-truth* world is our superficial, disconnected sense of self and parochial idea of community with an inordinately defensive view on others; I suggested that we translate our *feeling of transcendence* into *the boundary-breaking disposition*. Religious education can be very useful for this task. The type of education that I refer to here is non-confessional religious education. While the confessional religious education is intended to "impart and consolidate a set of religious beliefs and values" (Chapman 2016, p. 193), the non-confessional religious education takes religion as an interpretive paradigm through which to find various ways to understand human communities and as a methodological tool to bring in a wider spectrum of issues to enlarge our existing knowledge (Bobinac 2007). This value of religious education has long been recognized, assessed, and expanded by experts from a variety of academic communities. For instance, Gabriel Moran's seminal work, Religious Education as a Second Language (Moran 1989), opened up a new horizon for our understanding of the utility of religious education in not only deepening personal faith but also cultivating positive skills demanded in international, interreligious, intergenerational, and interinstitutional domains. It has been also recognized as a rich source for the development of a special disposition to effectively deal with the big questions of life. Parks (2011) argued that it is faith and religious education that vitalize "the mode of making meaning," (Parks 2011, p. 6) which I believe young adults, particularly college students, need to acquire to be able to deal with higher-order questions. Due to the unlimited scope of subjects, including metaphysics and spirituality, religion is a great resource for our intellectual inquiry. In this section, I will present a showcase of the religious education, which can cultivate a disposition to fight the *post-truth* mentality. The showcase is a reflection on the Five Big Questions that I formulated to guide the direction of the learning activities of my Introduction to Religion course. These questions include *personal identity*, *ultimate meaning*, *transcendence*, *vocation*, and *service*. They would help set up a good pedagogical framework for the new intellectual virtues discussed earlier. I will provide general descriptions of the Five Big Questions first and then a discussion of what specific learning outcomes I intend for each question. The Five Big Questions:

(1) *Personal Identity*: Who am I? What does it mean to be human? How can I live a life of meaning, dignity, and joy?

(2) *Transcendence*: Is there more to life than meets the eye? Is there a higher reality that penetrates or sustains our existence? What do people think about God and spirituality? What are beauty, love, and hope? What is the true reality? What is the significance of spiritual experience? To where do I ultimately belong? Do I have reason to transcend my physical boundaries and limits and the capacity to do it?

(3) *Ultimate meaning*: What is most important? What is of supreme value? What is truly worth caring about?

(4) *Vocation*: What am I called to do? What obligation do I have to others and to the world? Why does it matter what work I do? What duties do I fulfill to realize my complete self? What is the ultimate meaning and purpose of my job in this world? For what do I have to use my talents? How is vocation related to my spirituality?

(5) *Service*: How can I make a lasting contribution to others? Where is my place in the suffering of the world? How should I be related to my fellow humans? How does this religion explain the relationship between *I and Thou*? What is the meaning and value of community for my spiritual journey? What do I have to do for my neighbors and community? Are there certain duties and commandments that I have?

These Five Big Questions are placed in the syllabus of my Introduction to Religion course (RELI101). RELI101 is one of the most demanding general education (GE) courses at my institution, the University of Findlay. Just as the institutional mission statement, "*Meaningful Life and Productive Career,*" indicates, educating the whole person is the core value of our university. The course objectives of RELI101 reflect clearly this institutional goal. In addition to the general knowledge of world religions and religious studies, this course intends to promote civic virtues, including religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, for which all the learning activities are designed. Five Big Questions are provided to give our students a bigger picture of the course objectives. I want my students to ponder these questions when they work on the course assignments. In particular, they are required to use them when writing their weekly religion journal. The weekly religion journal consists of two components: summary and reflection. Students summarize the main points of the weekly reading and write their reflection, responding to one of those questions. Following is my explanation of how each question would serve *the boundary-breaking* disposition.

The question of *personal identity* is intended to lead students to reflect on their notion of self. Through a variety of religious stories and texts, students come to think about what has been taken for granted the most. Who and what am I? What defines me? What makes me unique from others? What do I share with others to exist? Not only would these questions help students feel the importance of having a clear sense of identity and confirm their existing notion of self but also challenge them to reassess and reformulate it. Many religious narratives encourage students to enhance and enlarge their personal identity. For instance, the *sisal* (씨알) philosophy of Ham Seok-Heon, one of the most influential religious thinkers and political activists in modern Korea, calls for building personal identity upon the universal identity of *saengmyeon* (생명, life). The life of Jesus presents a developing process of personal identity from being a Jew to the Son of God. The spiritual journey of Buddha demonstrates a dramatic shift of the self from a social construct called *varna* or *jati* to the *bodhisattva* identity and the enlightened state of consciousness. The notion of Atman, the essential self, in the *Changdogya Upanishad*, disrupts our idea of physical self as normative. All of these ideas are not meant to undermine the existing notions of personal identity of my students but to empower them to have authorship and ownership in this profound task. They encourage students to explore, clarify, and deepen their personal identities by questioning anything that can be considered a *boundary* particularly in the dimension of ontology and anthropology.

The question of *transcendence* tackles our cognitive issues and aesthetic sensibilities. Transcendence means "extending or going beyond the limits of ordinary experience" (Merriam-Webster 2018). Students are asked to think about ultimate reality from both physical and metaphysical points of view. Religious materials push them to stretch their imagination of reality. They are exposed to various types of reasoning from different traditions and required to compare and contrast these with their own thoughts. They come to realize that religion has a lot to offer to enhance their knowledge of reality. For instance, skeptics and atheists would learn about the rich intellectual history of religion in explaining the origin and the working principle of the universe. Theists would be introduced to a variety of persuasive expressions of the divine from non-theistic points of view. Similarly, students from the religious mainstream would be surprised by the creativity of the unorthodox traditions such as Kabbalism, Sufism, and Catholic mysticism. Students also experience the encounter between religion and science in unlocking the unknown. Examples would be exploring the quantum physics with the Buddhist philosophy of interconnectedness and dependent co-arising, the evolutionary theory with process theology, and the inflationary theory of the universe with Islamic cosmology.[2] Considering the question of transcendence is intended to shake the students' epistemological boundary for a positive change.

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2   See Qur'an, 51:47.

The question of *ultimate meaning* aims at presenting the students with religious teachings and narratives that could offer different ways to feel the value of life and get the sense of direction in hardship. While secular human skills and intelligence are intended primarily for survival, success, and prosperity, the common core message of most religious traditions teaches otherwise. For instance, organizational and personal success is a common indicator of happiness in the non-religious world. However, the life and ministry of Jesus defied this norm. He wanted to "serve instead of rule, suffer instead of inflicting suffering, and cross social lines instead of reinforcing them" (Nikolajsen 2015, p. 91). Similarly, while the ultimate meaning in the pre-Islamic society was based on the tribal mentality that caused a whole host of barbaric customs, Muhammad abolished female infanticide, exploitation of the poor, endless tribal warfare and religious intolerance. Students also learn about different understandings of, and approaches to, meaningful life. They learn, through Abrahamic religions, that people can find meaning in life by reconnecting with God and thereby reconstructing everything under God's guidance and providence. However, Indian religions suggest that we disconnect from everything and detach ourselves from desire, including even the desire to search for God. Therefore, the question of ultimate meaning is intended to challenge or broaden the student's axiological boundary.

The question of *service* leads students to reflect on the deeper meaning and value of serving others. For some religious thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, recognizing and serving others is a way to find the self (Niebuhr 2011, p. 4). Serving others is a central message of most religious traditions. Students learn about the Buddhist emphasis on love through Jataka tales such as *The Selfless Hare*. The suffering of Jesus is a dramatic example of unconditional love. The Prophet Muhammad said, "O 'A'ishah! Never turn away any needy man from your door empty-handed. O 'A'ishah! Love the poor; bring them near to you and God will bring you near to Him on the Day of Resurrection."[3] Fellow humans are not opponents in the battle of the survival of the fittest. They play an important role to fulfill our whole being. They are brothers and sisters in the eyes of Christians and Muslims; they are part of my being and consciousness in the eyes of Hindus. They are the bodhisattvas or the Buddha nature in the eyes of Zen Buddhists. Students come to explore different rationales for serving others. We serve others not just because it brings rewards but because it is a commandment of God, a divine duty (dharma), or a part of a larger cosmic principle.

Finally, the question of *vocation* expands students' understanding of work. They are encouraged to think about the relationship between their future careers and the meaning of their lives. Differing from a job or a profession, a vocation is a purpose-driven work that brings deep satisfaction and fulfillment. The Latin word *vocare* means an awareness of a higher purpose or a divine calling. Thus, the driving force of one's vocation should be more than the desire to secure financial means or not to fall behind other competitors in attaining well-being. It should be something internal that can give a strong sense of order and a clear sense of direction to all we do. This question challenges students to think about what would be an *enduring source or force* for them to experience meaning and value in different works they engage in. Students learn from various examples of divine calling such as God's calling of Jesus in the Judean desert, Allah's calling of Muhammad in a cave of Hira, and Siddhartha's inner calling through his experience of the Four Sights in Kapilavastu.

These Five Big Questions allow my students to anticipate the type of learning materials that RELI101 offers and the overall tone and direction of my teaching. The lesson activities that these questions guide would not lead to a particular set of answers but rather a cognitive disquietude, which would push students to reflect and confirm their own belief system and readjust them, if needed. Exposed to a variety of ways to understand and respond to the problems of life, students would not only enhance their critical thinking but also cultivate the art of *intellectual patience* that Karl Rahner believes would demand both the intention to seek clarity of their knowledge and humility from their acknowledgment of the limitations and incalculability of knowledge. He said, "Those who really

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3   See Qur'an 3:159.

manage to have intellectual patience with themselves will also be tolerant toward their neighbors and will not behave as though they were absolute truth in person" (Rahner 1965, p. 47).

4. Conclusions

I have argued that the fundamental problem of *post-truth* is *the boundary-drawing/building mindset* manifesting as a parochial sense of self and community and an inordinately defensive stance toward others. Religious education offers abundant resources to promote *the boundary-breaking disposition* by translating *the feeling of transcendence* into creative pedagogical contents and strategies. It cultivates various moral ideals and civic virtues: tolerance, reconciliation, hospitality, forgiveness, unconditional love, justice, etc. In this paper, I have presented as a showcase the Five Big Questions that are used for my Introduction to Religion course. Helping students engage deeply in a variety of religious stories and practices, these questions expose them to a plethora of truth claims and worldviews from different traditions and academic fields. I believe that the practical functions of religious education such as enhancement of critical thinking and promotion of civic virtue should be more recognized and encouraged in higher education, and it would help our students better prepare for the *post-truth* epidemic.

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