Learning is remembering: Meno’s paradox as a problem for religious education

Ryan Haecker, University of Cambridge

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Room GS1, Donald McIntyre Building, Faculty of Education, Cambridge

Abstract: To learn we must learn to ask questions, not only of our own favoured answers, but even of our own forgotten questions. The most forgotten questions of religious education are those of theology. Theology asks the greatest questions of the fundamental possibility of all of the arts, sciences, and even of education. It may ask: how is it possible to learn? To learn is to come to know that which is not yet known. Yet, as Socrates had hinted, there appears to be a paradox in the possibility of learning: for if a thing is known, then learning is not necessary; yet if a thing is not known, then learning is not possible. The Meno Paradox thus presents what we may consider to be the essential problematic of education. It ostensibly seems to stifle learning. Yet, at its aperture, the questions of education also open up again to those of theology. For, if as Plato suggests, learning is recollection, and recollection requires a primitive knowledge of the ideas, then learning ultimately requires a recollection of all of the ideas - and, supremely, of the highest ideas that are named in theology. To learn is to recollect that which is never not known; of that which is always already known; of the most primordial and present knowledge - that is, of the stories with which we yet may learn of the first beginning and final end of any education. Theology is, for this reason, central to the task, not only of religious education, but, as I shall suggest, and religious education may uniquely teach us, of any education.

Ryan Haecker is a PhD candidate at Peterhouse in the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Cambridge. He has previously studied history, philosophy, and theology at the University of Texas, the University Würzburg, and the University of Nottingham. He has published over a dozen papers, and has presented over sixty papers at conferences around the world. His research investigates theological interpretations of logic. He is currently completing an interdisciplinary research project, under the supervision of Rowan Williams, at the intersections of historical and systematic theology, on the transformation of ancient logic in the trinitarian theology of Origen of Alexandria.

Contact: PESGB Cambridge Branch Secretary: Daniel Moulin-Stożek (dpm50@cam.ac.uk)