ESCAPING PURITY:
LESSONS FOR CHILD AND YOUTH CARE FROM RELIGION

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Abstract: By taking up the suggestion of Michel Serres (1991) to use the history of religion to study change processes, this paper explores the development of the field of Child and Youth Care (CYC) and its current state of change. It draws on Karen Armstrong's (2001) portrayal of the history and development of fundamentalism across religious traditions to serve as a mirror for this reflective exercise, calling on CYC to risk the complexity of a self-reflective critique in moving forward to the next stage of development professionally and academically.

Keywords: fear, fundamentalism, practices, change

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This paper is a reflection on child and youth care (CYC), broadly understood, that uses the habits of reflexive practice while drawing on a different perspective from outside the field to consider the developmental phase of CYC, its possible direction, and the implications suggested through the reflective exercise. Child and youth care in North America is a relatively new field focused on professional practice in the care of children, youth, and families in a variety of contexts, supported by academic diploma and degree programs, particularly in Canada. It is currently establishing mechanisms for accreditation and professional certification. It would be recognized under other identity markers in other parts of the world, closely related, for example, to the field of social pedagogy in Europe and social care work in the United Kingdom.

The paper brings together observations, felt experiences, and personal responses – a being with – that have arisen working in a context where CYC is much discussed,

commented on, debated, and defended. It is concerned about the current (and perhaps permanent) identity-making process and the establishing of orthodox claims and beliefs in CYC. I offer an assessment of the "state of the union" for consideration by practitioners and scholars.

Attending to Context

I begin with Derrida's insight (1988) that there is nothing outside of context: a correction to his often cited idea that there is nothing outside of text. In a new field it is important as context is not always written or coded – textualized – in deliberate conscious ways and, therefore, cannot always be based on citations. The textual record is itself a careful construct of shared ideas and approaches that are the accepted doctrines and ideas of the field. There are other contextual traces that are often non-verbal or, when verbalized, unconscious of their complexity and implications. CYC, as a context, is complicated and so, I use one of the field's own practices, reflexivity, as a tool that offers a sensible approach for my assessment.

It appears to me that in the process to name and claim identity there is currently some shared disquiet. Some of the collective anxieties in CYC surface in conversations, in online postings, and in discussions about the field over coffee. As it is a new field, it is not uncommon for some colleagues to feel and say that their place and contributions as CYC workers and practitioners are unrecognized. There is a parallel concern that CYC will disappear, to be subsumed under other names. The following are some of the "hearsay" comments from students in and post their practicum experiences, from recent graduates finding their way in professional settings, from longer-term practitioners, and occasionally from academics:

- we see ourselves and our field as under-acknowledged – this feedback often comes from graduates working in the field who sense that their way of working and their perceptions of what is required in a given situation are ignored or undervalued;
- our workers often feel isolated and their identity as CYC threatened – they get professionally labelled by titles that do not name them as CYC workers, most commonly as social workers, a brand name that has become de-capitalized and generic in popular parlance but always carries for CYCers the older professional identity brand;
- our beliefs, values, and practices are not recognized as vital for the care and well being of children, youth, and families – our graduates speak of feeling like junior members of interdisciplinary teams, even if they have the most contact with and knowledge of clients being reviewed;
- our beliefs in things like strength-based, ecological practice are under threat – they are no longer perceived as our exclusive domain. Moreover, they now also appear to be under threat from critics within our own ranks who wish to challenge these truths of practice and critique such central tenets as developmental theory.

This partial list echoes the fears and anxieties that need to be considered for their impact on the direction of the field and for the responses they engender both individually and collectively.

Another Development

A second form of CYC knowledge and language I am adapting for the purposes of this reflection comes from developmental theory that I extend to institutional settings. I have worked in a number of institutional contexts in my lifetime, some new, young, and fresh (a theatre commune, a retail business), some in a more adolescent stage of their institutional development (several different universities, the CBC), and one well on in its organizational life cycle (a mainline Christian church). I draw on my experiences in those contexts for guidance to the field of CYC. In looking at the current CYC context, I consider it to be somewhere in mid-adolescent development. This is a time when identity matters and when choices about direction are being made.

Let me clarify that I am using the term "institution" in a loose way to encompass many contexts where institutional characteristics can be identified. All the sites, from commune to university to churches to professional disciplines like CYC have structure, have an ongoing life form, have people who identify as belonging to the site, and maintain forms, policies, and practices that are recognizable as being part of their identity. Institutional structures tend to persist over time, tend to preserve themselves, and normally work to protect their collective identities through a variety of mechanisms. As a colleague once joked: from movement to monument to mausoleum, that is, from a lively or inspired beginning to gradual stasis and the decline of activity and vitality, to becoming a memory with a grand past. In the political world, this is the movement from revolution and grassroots uprising through civilization, to empire and decline, to historical ruins, to visit as tourists.

A further trigger for this reflection comes from Michel Serres' (1991) *Rome: The book of foundations* in which he explores the myths, processes, and structures of culture and knowledge to articulate foundations. He suggests that one way to understand history and change processes in cultures would be to look at the history of religion and its institutions as they have been around for such a long time, longer than other institutional structures[1]. Change happens in them slowly, often very slowly. Change in religious institutions may move at a glacial or even tectonic plate pace and because of the slow speed, they offer centuries-long views of their processes and therefore, insight into how change happens in institutional life, and how institutions develop, for better or for worse.

Living, as I do, in an active earthquake zone it is possible to imagine that sudden change can have a devastating impact but even so, it takes time for pressure to build to a cataclysmic shift. Earthquakes that cause massive change are rare. Geological changes are usually long slow processes. Serres' book implies that foundations are not solid but fluid, in motion, and subject to shifting and change, even if taking centuries to achieve.

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[1] Serres refuses all citations in his work and it is a practice I lean towards.

About the Title

Before proceeding into the reflection, an explanation of the title "escaping purity" is in order. I confess, that since this exploration draws on religion and religious ideas, that I am not a fan of purity or claims that anything we do or construct can be completely clean, unadorned, or unmixed. Calls to purity are not infrequent in religious settings. Purity, as a concept, is entangled with ideas of cleanliness and chastity: Something is pure if it is free "from mixture of any kind" (Geddie, 1968, p. 892), "clean, winnowed or unadorned". In its early Latin form *purus(n)* it meant, as a legal term, unconditional, absolute or, curiously, subject to no religious claims (Traupman, 1966/1995, p. 347). In light of the rest of the argument that follows, I note the implication that religion makes things impure and complicated.

In my world, ideas, institutions, and people are admixtures: messy accumulations that are of interest precisely because they are not pure. Claims to and pursuit of purity make me anxious because they seem, ultimately, to exclude everything but themselves. The pure cannot possibly mix with anything impure because such an encounter would automatically soil the pure by making a mixture. Being pure or aspiring to purity seems to be a false and impossible labour with rather dark implications as it must be exclusionary. Claiming to have exceptional knowledge or know-how about a belief or practice creates exclusion as it creates a special form of inclusion for only those in the know, and consequently, exclusion for those who do not know. My reaction against purity may be a shadow from my time working in an institutional church setting where I have witnessed the harm done by strident calls to purity in communities. I prefer the messier middle, with complexity and compromise part of the mix.

John Caputo (2006) deconstructs the word *community* in an etymological exercise in which he points out that community may have origins in the Latin word *communis* (meaning common) but that that word comes from *com – munis* meaning *com –* with, *munis –* fortifications from *munire:* to fortify (p. 268). A community, in his reading, is a fortified space, a defensible site that has those who are inside and safe, and those who are outside and potentially dangerous. A community is a bounded space of limited belonging if we accept Caputo's etymology. In this paper I do.

I am attempting to make clear that whether CYC is seen as a field, an institution, or a community or set of communities, the challenge remains: It is a site where there is the potential of inclusion and exclusion. It is a site in process that has to engage the tensions of change and shifting identity. In the curriculum of our education programs, we teach change theories and discuss identity formation so we have insight to bring to bear on the same issues at the collective level.

Beginning the Reflection

I have already claimed that child and youth care, as an institutional site, is developmentally somewhere between early adolescence and early adult life – overall a young institution in a stage of development where identity is important and still being formulated.

As a young institution, CYC may be able to learn from some of the struggles of older institutions. In what follows I will draw on Serres' suggestion to pay attention to religious contexts, to reflect on what I see in CYC, raise some concerns, and point to some trends and their implications.

It was evident in recent debates about the field – the focus of much conversation around the 2011 CYC in Action Conference at the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria – that identity is a tension point. Following a call for papers posted for the conference, there were a series of online postings in response that appeared on CYC-Net members forum around the year-end of 2010 that demonstrated some of the borders and divides about identity. There were strong claims being made about what counts as CYC and what CYC is claimed to be as practice, theory, and research. There were comments in the postings that claimed that some ideas and approaches were really CYC and others were suspect with the unfortunate additional implication that some people were not really CYC, not in the community, and dangerous to the well-being of the field as it is known and claimed by members who see themselves as inside the community and keepers of its "true" purpose and identity.

I want to note that my thinking about this paper and the issues I care about preceded the exchanges on CYC-Net but those comments came to exemplify my concerns about the maturity and direction of our field; how we represent and claim identity in CYC; and our beliefs about ourselves, our work, our professional practices, the place of theory, the role of research, and what shapes the field now and into the future.

A clarifying point is necessary. There are no institutions that are singular in their perspective or approach. Religious institutions are and have been myriad, multiple, complex, and conflicted: Not only under a meta-title like Islam, Judaism, or Christianity is there neither unity in religious contexts nor purity of self-definition or purpose, but even in sub-sectors like Sunni, Orthodox, or Catholic there are complexities, divisions, sectarian variations, and frequently disagreement. Religious institutions are marked by differences, variations, and uncomfortable divisions. These are common dynamics in all institutions and may be necessary.

In some contexts that dynamic is allowed to remain as a tension that produces vitality and ongoing change. In others, it leads to endless degrees of fragmentation and smaller and smaller sectioning (sects) divided by increasingly more particular claims and, so-called, critical issues. In church settings, I have witnessed verbal and emotional battles over things such as women or gay clergy, use of resources, and attempts to change familiar practices or ritual texts that lead to quite ugly and damaging divisions. In the worst cases historically, divisions inside major faiths have led to violence and slaughter: witness the Inquisition, witness the intersectarian violence currently in Islam where religious pilgrims have become targets for bomb attacks.

Violence between religions has produced similar horrors and slaughter. The list here is long and stretches from past to present in unceasing frequency. The Crusades, and the subjection of Indigenous ceremonial practices, languages, and culture, by both Christianity

and Islam in the Americas, Africa, and Asia have much in common. Conquest has many forms and empires have often relied on state-sanctioned belief systems to subdue and manage populations. The result in religious contexts has not been unity, and certainly not compassion, but rather fragmentation, mistrust and, in spite of attempts to hold to singular claims and perspectives, continued dispersal and disagreement. In my observation, in healthy institutions with more open attitudes, diversity breaks out and vitality results. There is always a danger that trouble may ensue and, in my experience, it is frequently led by those who claim new or different perspectives as being unacceptable, not understandable, dangerous or evil, and not really what "we" are. Many names or accusations can be used to exclude change in whatever form it appears and to vilify those who promote new ways of thinking, being, or doing.

A Tool for Reflection

I turn now to Karen Armstrong's (2001) book entitled, *The battle for God: A history of fundamentalism*, as it presents an overview of political and religious conflicts in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism over the last several centuries and offers a perspective on change processes in religious contexts. Armstrong sets up a number of tensions that I think are worth noting and may be useful for understanding growing pains in CYC. I will use her arguments about contemporary religious contexts as a mirror for understanding CYC. In doing so, I am précising her arguments into a manageable form for this reflection.

A central issue in Armstrong's book is how people manage the dynamic between two aspects of their culture. First is their *mythos*, that is, the legends, stories, and beliefs about who they are and what that means for them (a matter of core identity). In most religious settings it includes a sense of being special people who have been called to a special way of life. Sometimes it means a belief that they have a divine revelation to offer to the world, making them responsible to make the world better, to save it, or judge it. *Mythos*, Armstrong argues, is over against what she calls the *logos*, that is, the rational, structural practices of making and managing communal life, politics, economy, and the playing out of practices that deal with the mundane. It is never a strict duality of either/or but always a complex interaction and dynamic shifting of whatever inclination receives the most energy and attention[2]. Her greatest concern is what can go wrong when the two are confused and *mythos* is turned into *logos*, that is when mythic ideas or principles become literal, defined by specific practices, and are treated as fact and hard reality rather than the soft, intuitive, imaginative, and inspirational roles they would normally play. Similarly, trouble occurs when *logos* takes on the attributes of a *mythos*, that is when logic becomes myth and believers believe they have no myths but only cold hard truth[3] in a pure form modelled on correct practices and that they have some obligation to enforce that knowing and their ways on others. The sets of strict practices must be followed precisely (and without question) in order for the community to maintain its borders and identity. Armstrong claims a necessary balance as essential for a healthy community and community relationships (as well as relations

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[2] I am summarizing an argument Armstrong develops over several chapters complete with detailed examples from various traditions.

[3] Serres (1991), for example, claims the myth of science is that it has no myths.

among communities). It appears that the confusion of *mythos* and *logos* has dire consequences.

In looking at the growth of fundamentalist communities across religious traditions, that she argues have confused *mythos* and *logos*, Armstrong names some common community identity markers that produce fundamentalist responses. She describes the qualities of communities that feel themselves to be under stress or threat from mainstream culture and its practices as follows:

- they feel isolated;
- they feel like an unacknowledged minority;
- they feel their true identity and beliefs are not recognized or valued;
- they feel what they believe in and practice is under threat of disappearing;
- they feel marginalized.

This list worries me as it echoes many of the qualities that I identified earlier as markers of the current "sense-of-self" that is part of the CYC context as shared unofficially within the family, inside the confines of the safety of the community.

Armstrong asserts that communities of believers who find themselves in a threatened position have similar reactions. She sees fundamentalists across traditions as being alike not different: A fundamentalist Islamist and a fundamentalist Christian are alike in more ways than they are different. She identifies a process in which communities under threat, including those actually under political and social repression, turn in on themselves. When they have a sense of inferiority, they huddle together, in hiding or in isolation. Over time, in response to a desire to survive and protect the special beliefs and/or practices that they have, they hone those beliefs or practices into exacting forms that must be strictly followed in order to be identified as belonging to the true believers (turning *mythos* into *logos*). Because the beliefs are valuable and vulnerable, requiring protection, the threatened communities develop a more militant stance that becomes increasingly aggressive toward others who do not agree or will not practice their real way or, as it is seen from within the community, the true way.

It can get ugly because ideas under threat can evolve in such a way that the *mythos/logos* confusion happens and the framework of beliefs demands such a degree of purity that enemies of true belief multiply and come to include fellow believers who do not believe in precisely the right way. There may be a claim to a mythic past as the basis of the new purified doctrine. A certain rigidity sets in and calls from either inside or outside the community to re-examine assumptions or ask for change increase the sense of threat and resistance which in turn increases the conditions that compel a turn to more fundamentalist thinking and the divides increase. Traditions that try to preserve themselves by insistence on purity of belief or practice become generators of conflict and hostility. Enemies multiply and sometimes the enemies are those who are close at hand and close in beliefs.

So in religious conflicts Sunnis kill Shia, Protestants slaughter Catholics, the Orthodox stone reformers. The pattern repeats across cultures and epochs. Religious history cannot hide its violence. A similar violence can be seen in contexts in which different

religions occupy the same geographical territory, the partition of India after independence being an example at one attempted solution to separate conflicted believers that is still producing inter-religious conflict, now coated with nationalism.

Armstrong claims that in this process communities are responding from fear: driven by worries and anxieties about identity and beliefs, language and practices. Fear-driven responses move incrementally and steadily toward violence. She traces the movement from disagreement to debate to assault in each of the fundamentalist movements in each of the major religious traditions. This is not a journey we want to duplicate in CYC.

I find her analysis sobering as I have worked in religious contexts, seen and felt the belief-based violence that claims a kind of righteousness in its attack mode. I have friends who have been decimated by true believers who disagreed with them over matters of practice, sexuality, or leadership. It does not matter what the claim is, what matters is the consequence of cruelty and the hurt, damage, and destruction it can cause. Armstrong is quite clear when she points out that if a religious community or collection of believers violates their primary claims – love, peace, unity – in defending themselves, they betray their core beliefs.

She notes how, in the subtle shifts of their own claims, they select particular pieces of their core or sacred texts to promote and justify resistance to change and eventually to support exclusion and violence. Their beliefs are reinforced by self-referential texts that only acknowledge the received wisdom of their existing beliefs. There are significant issues of congruency and integrity at stake in the loss of core beliefs that are being defended by violating them. This may be especially confusing when the language used is the shared language of the institutional context that is twisted to promote exclusion. It is relatively easy to identify the kind of language used in religious contexts to mark real believers and, therefore, also to mark those who are not, who do not say the same things or use the right language.

In our case, to claim "that is not real CYC" is laced with assumptions that there is such a thing, that it is known, and that those who know can tell what it is. There is also an assumption that the tacit insider knowledge makes such judgments accurate and a "true believer" (Hoffer, 1951) will be able to discern who is legitimately CYC and who is not.

In the Mirror

CYC is still young; it is a field that has had a persistent inferiority sense in its early stages of development. We are sometimes in a defensive posture against the persistent marginalization and attacks on our expertise. We take great offence at being called something other than CYC workers. We want our expertise and skills in practice to be noted and named as ours.

Using Armstrong's theory as a guide, we, as a field, have to be astute about how we deal with change, how we mature our ideas, how we allow our practices to acknowledge the

wisdom of others, and how we manage doubt and inquiry arising from within that questions our true and cherished beliefs.

I worry when I attend CYC events and they feel to me like religious gatherings I have attended in the past with a self-congratulatory air and a kind of pious superiority. I worry that we are being seduced to a form of purity in our *mythos* that we have superior insight and that there is a CYC way that must be adhered to, without question, and that there are a limited number of ways to understand and enact that way – our way. This unfortunately implies that there are only a certain number of people who know how to do and be CYC properly, a select few who are "real CYC".

When I first joined the School of Child and Youth Care faculty, a graduate student accused me of not really being CYC because I had never worked in a group home or residential care setting. My years of theatre, community and church-based youth work, parent education, and youth worker training meant nothing. There was a defining limit to "real" CYC and I was not in it. Exclusionary practice seems to me to be a violation of one of our critical tenets of strength-based practice: including and building on what is. For our practice to be effective, it has to be congruent at all levels (Anglin, 2002), including our relations with one another. To my way of thinking, hoping to inspire change in our clients means that to be congruent we have also to be open to change and being changed personally and collectively. If we ask for self-awareness and reflexivity, we need to demonstrate both in our ways of working and relating.

Another Turn

There is another danger that lingers in the confusion of *mythos* and *logos* and that is a rather naïve dismissal of *logos* as Armstrong describes it. Through a form of enthusiasm and commitment to beliefs – a *mythos* – critical sensibility is set aside. Claims are made and one is expected not to have a critical view of them. If someone believes something to be true, it must be. *Mythos* is writ large and impenetrable. Belief is evidence. Alternate or contradictory interpretations are not to be considered, nor are suggestions of doubt allowed.

Claims that are being made are surrounded with an aura of mystique and wonder, as if insider knowledge and practice must not be challenged. The exclusion of critical faculties reduces ideas and concepts to whatever beliefs or claims are being made. New ideas, critiques, and re-examinations cannot be permitted to threaten the existing *mythos*.

It is a concern that simplistic claims may be potentially dangerous if they are not tested or adapted to a range of contexts that may be complex and complicated. Enthusiasm and ecstasy are not a good basis for practice that can be responsive and responsible to multiple contexts. Practice needs a better and more thoughtful foundation than "I believe". Armstrong is adamant that there needs to be a balanced dynamic of *logos* and *mythos*. It is not a solution to the difficulties of one kind of approach to opt entirely for the other.

As a discipline, child and youth care still has, as many adolescents do, moments of untempered enthusiasm and conviction. This is part of a developing field's maturation but all

claims need to be reconsidered, critiqued, and reconceptualized. The field of child and youth care needs to have critical thought for it to provide insight into work with people of all circumstances, contexts, and beliefs. Research and theory need to support and inform practice. Tradition and existing knowledge and practice are not enough. A field develops and matures when it is willing to examine and reconsider, that is, to be reflexive of its own practices and knowledge.

It is not enough to be keen and eager, to say that if only others would listen to us, and use our approach, the world would be different and children would be saved from all manner of difficulties. My anxieties multiply when our stance sounds like the fervour that stirs in fundamentalism. Growing a field is a complicated process that will include disagreement and conflict.

Final Remarks

It is important for CYC, as the field matures, that we avoid the confusion of *mythos* and *logos* as much as possible and be cautious in our claims, as well as contextually aware and astute. Can we reconsider our position that we have unique claims on ideas like relational practice or strength-based approaches? Can we accept that we do not have some magical capacity and that our insights into the lives of children, youth, and families are not exclusive? Can we understand we are not the only practitioners in the world who work relationally? What are the strengths we can build on? What can we change to improve practice? What theories can help us hone our work and develop it to the next stages of maturity and expertise?

I am not dismissing the insights and good practice of our history and field but in moving forward we must not retreat into a ghetto of exclusivity trying to protect territory by falling into fear-based motifs and forms. How do we stay open, learning as we go? How do we continue to be responsive and adaptable rather than claiming we have already arrived and have the answer? How do we critique our own ideas and not feel that we must defend and protect them from change?

One of the great strengths of CYC has been its interdisciplinary history that has drawn on a number of fields, borrowing and adapting ideas to weave a way of practice. Can we persist in being open to ideas from other places that will enrich us even as it forces us to alter our ways and some of our ideas?

How are we to maintain an ethos of care and compassion in our work of reflective practice as we let our collective identity evolve? We need to practice care and compassion with one another so that we do not make each other into enemies. The history of religions shows that disagreements within a community are far more destructive than attacks from the outside. We cannot afford to back into the future admiring our past, our claims, and our special insights. We work in challenging, difficult times and places that require us to be, do, know, become in the moment based on the rich combination we have as heritage in research, knowledge, beliefs, compassion, and practices.

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