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## Role of the Religious Heart in the Motivational Process: A Judeo-Christian Perspective

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# The Role of the Religious Heart in the Motivational Process: A Judeo-Christian Perspective

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by Jack Fennema

## The Need for a Discussion

Educational psychology textbooks uniformly call for a holistic view of the student in the educational process—for teaching and learning that takes the whole student into consideration. The developmental portions of these textbooks typically deal with the social, physical, cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions of the student. But these same

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textbooks also uniformly exclude any reference to the religious dimension of the student as well as any citing of spiritual or faith development. A check of seventeen current educational psychology texts verified this point. Given the obvious religiosity of humankind and the nearly universal belief in God, a Supreme Being, or a Higher Power, this omission is curious, to say the least.

The question is "Why?" What is the reason for the stark omission of any reference to the religious nature of students as well as to their spiritual or faith development? One possible answer is that the mix of religion and education is too controversial during these politically correct times. After all, who is to say which religious position should be cited as the norm? The adage that to avoid controversy one should stay away from a discussion of religion and politics is followed well within educational circles. Yet, in this age of post-modern pluralism when every village has its story and the right to share it, perhaps the time has come for including a religiously-oriented view of anthropology and development in the discussion.

There may, however, be a more sophisticated reason for the absence of religion in educational psychology texts: a sacred/secular dichotomy. Religion has usually been cited as a private, subjective matter, one that should not be mixed with more scientific and objective pursuits. This position was espoused particularly during the modern era that began with the Enlightenment. In other words, a dichotomous position has most often been struck: religion is to remain separate from other aspects of reality. This viewpoint is

essentially a modern version of Greek rationalistic thought. In separating the sacred from the secular, experts imply that religion has nothing to say to the other parts of human life and the world within which a person lives.

This article seeks to initiate a discussion of this issue. Its purpose is to contribute to the sparse literature (Fennema, 1994; Graham, 1997; Van Brummelen, 1988) dealing with the religious dimension of humankind within the educational enterprise by focusing on the heart in particular. Using the Bible as the primary reference source, I will develop the perspectives of the Jews within the Old Testament and of Christians within the New Testament. By showing that the dynamics of the heart have a profound influence on human motivation, I will demonstrate the relevance of these perspectives for education.

The heart can be viewed from two integral perspectives (Wolters, 1985). Its ontological structure shows the metaphysical heart to be the unifying core of humankind's existence—the center of the person. On the other hand, in a moral or directional sense, the heart serves as the focal point of religious expression for humankind. Exploring these two aspects of the heart will constitute the primary contributions of this article. These will be followed by a discussion of implications for motivation within the school setting.

### **The Ontological Structure of the Religious Heart**

Ontology or metaphysics is the dimension of philosophy that deals with these questions: What is real? Does a non-biological, metaphysical heart really exist? If so, what does it look like? What are its unique structural characteristics that cause it to be a heart and not something else? These are ontological questions that need to be addressed.

A search within one dictionary revealed forty-three definitions for "heart," forty-one of which dealt with the non-biological heart (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 1993). One of the definitions referred to the heart as being the center of personality, but none referred to the heart as the *religious* center of the person. While the existence of a metaphysical heart appears to be well accepted by many, the religious nature of that heart may be more problematic.

Although most people can talk glibly about the non-physical "heart," it is difficult to describe. For Jews who accept the Torah and the Talmud (essentially, the Old Testament portion of the Bible) as their bottom-line of authority for faith and practice and for Christians who accept both the Old and New Testaments in a similar fashion, the source for understanding the religious heart is the Holy Scriptures. That a religious heart exists, both Jews and Christians do not doubt, for their holy books say it does. Even though one cannot see or touch it, the manifestations of its activity can be observed. And just as the physical heart can be viewed as the center of one's biological functioning, the heart, as the Bible uses this term, is the center of one's self. The heart is "the inner core of the person; the 'organ' of thinking, feeling, and willing; the point of concentration of all our functions" (Hoeksema, 1986, p.172). As soul is "a synonym for person," so "the heart is the center of the soul, the point from which the soul's life issues [i.e., radiates, originates]" (Prenter, 1967, pp.273-274). Spykman (1992) writes:

More than 800 references to heart are woven into the fabric of [the Bible]. An overview of these passages reflects a clear pattern. They all point consistently toward a single and simple truth: The heart represents the unifying center of man's entire existence.... It is the wellspring of all our willing, thinking, feeling, acting, and every other life utterance. It is the fountainhead from which flows every movement of man's intellect, emotions, and will as well as any other "faculty" or mode of our existence. In short, the heart is the mini-me. He who has my heart has me, not just part of me, but me wholly. Hence the urgency of the divine summons, "My son, [my daughter], give me thy heart!" (Proverbs 23:26). (p. 218)

The heart, as the governing center of the person, unifies the various dimensions of one's personality—the manifestations or expressions of a person. *Figure 1* illustrates the heart in its relationship to the dimensions of personality.

The dimensions of personality are an interrelational and interdependent unity, distinguished in the diagram solely for analytical purposes. They continually relate to and depend on each other. They are systemic. That which cannot be separated is viewed separately only to perceive the complex nature of the whole. The psycho-motor

dimension is placed closest to the social and cultural environment because it is the dimension that can be accessed most easily from forces outside of the person, as behaviorists would attest. On the other hand, the affective dimension is the most difficult to access from the outside. "The heart...is the pivotal point around which all of life revolves. It is the hub where all the spokes which hold the wheel of life together converge. There life in all its richly diverse manifestations finds its anchor point of...unity" (Spykman, 1992, p.220).

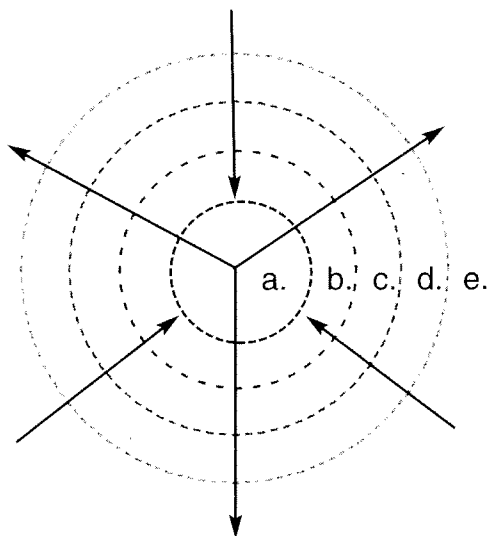


Figure 1: The unity of personality centered around the heart core.

- a. The unifying heart core
- b. The affective/emotional dimension
- c. The cognitive/thinking dimension
- d. The psycho-motor/physical dimension
- e. The social and cultural environment

The Hebraic use of the terms for heart, *leb* and *lebab*, promotes such a central, holistic, and unified position and role:

[t]he Hebrews thought in terms of subjective experience rather than objective, scientific observation, and thereby avoided the modern error of over-departmentalization. It was essentially the whole man, with all his attributes, physical, intellectual, and psychological, of which the Hebrew thought and spoke, and the heart was conceived as the governing center for all of these. (*The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962)

The Hebrew words for heart in the Old Testament reflect its holistic and all-encompassing facets:

heart refers to the physical 29 times, the personality 257 times, the emotional 166 times, the intellect 204 times, and the will 195 times. The use of the word heart in all of these contexts suggests that on the deepest level human beings are guided and determined from one central point that represents their true humanity, the heart (*The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, 1987).

Saint Augustine also thought of the heart as not only the seat of emotion or desire, but also the governing center of a human being. The heart is "the human being at his center, at his core, considered in his fundamental core. From the heart 'flow

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*Why the stark omission of reference to the religious nature of students?*

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the springs of life' (Proverbs 4:23)" (14.13). As Spykman explains, Augustine's view of the heart has disappeared:

During the early and medieval eras of Western Christianity, however, under the influence of Hellenist anthropologies, this holist view was largely lost. Heart was generally reduced to some part of human response to revelation. With the Reformation, in Luther as well as in Calvin, came a rediscovery of its original meaning. (Spykman, 1992, p.217)

With the advent of the Enlightenment and modernity, however, Greek rationalistic thought returned. The heart was, once again, not seen as the central, unifying, and governing core of humankind. At best, the heart, representing the spiritual or religious, is seen today as only one dimension among several (e.g., social, cognitive) in describing human personality, but not as the governing center that directs the other facets of personality.

**The Moral Direction of the Religious Heart**

Philosophy speaks to the ontological structure of the metaphysical heart, but the moral direction of the human heart is primarily a theological issue. Those who agree with the philosophical suppositions stated above about the heart being the

governing center of a person may well part company when theological tenets are introduced. But the heart's central position within one's being is only half of the story, for the heart has profound religious meaning for humankind. The heart is a person's religious focal point that sets the spiritual and moral direction for his or her life.

As the originating point of religion within a person, the heart has everything to do with a God-humankind relationship or connection. Gilkey (1959) puts the point this way:

Whether he wishes it or not, man as a free creature must pattern his life according to some chosen ultimate end, must center his life on some chosen ultimate loyalty, and must commit his security to some trusted power. Man is thus essentially, not accidentally, religious, because his basic structure, as dependent and yet free, inevitably roots his life in something ultimate. (p. 193)

The direction-giving function of the religious heart "is the response side of... relationship with God" (Spykman, 1992, p.219). People are created as worshipful beings, designed to live lives of obedience that honor the Creator. Only human beings *can* worship, and all human beings *do* worship. All societies have worshiped either the "one" God of the ancient Hebrews, other gods, other human beings, or parts of creation.<sup>1</sup> No one told them to; they possessed the felt need to worship, which is integral to the nature of all humanity.

Two pivotal portions of Scripture tie the worship of God to the heart. The first, the Jewish *Shema*, is found in the Old Testament; the second is the Great Commandment cited by Christ in the New Testament:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and [or, that is] with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts. (Deuteronomy 6:4-6)

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. (Matthew 22:37-38)

A person's heart direction is of definite interest to God. In fact, God views it as potentially humankind's highest good. When the prophet Samuel was seeking out the second king of Israel (c. 1000 BC), God said, "The LORD does not

look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7b). That king, David, later provided the following advice for his son Solomon, who was preparing to succeed him as king: "And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with whole-hearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts" (1 Chronicles 28:9a).

However, to understand fully the concept of heart direction one must determine the moral nature of the heart. Is humankind by nature morally good, bad, or neutral (Bigge, 1992)? The Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments cite human beings as being born with sinful natures. This means that every thought, word, or action is tainted by one's sinful moral tendencies from the time of birth. Several Scripture portions express this view:

The LORD..... said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood." (Following the flood, Genesis 8:21)

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (A Psalm of David, 51:5)

Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. (Words of Jesus, Matthew 15:19)

Within theological circles, the cause for this sinful nature from birth is called original sin. Because Adam, in his role as the federal head of all humankind, sinned, each of his descendants is born a sinner. The Apostle Paul states, "Sin entered the world through one man" (Romans 5:12).

As indicated in *Figure 1*, the arrows reflect two truths. The set of arrows that emerge from the heart core illustrate the direction-giving influence of the heart on all facets of personality. The other set of arrows illustrate that while it is true that the environment and other dimensions of the person do in fact influence one's personality, they cannot penetrate the heart and change it. That is the work of the Spirit of God. Scripture speaks about this renewal or God-initiated regeneration of one's heart in both the Old and New Testaments.

The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. (Moses speaking to the Israelites, Deuteronomy 30:6)

Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.  
(David following his sin with Bathsheba,  
Psalm 51:10-12)

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (God's words, Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." (John 3:5-6)

The right attitude of the heart begins with its being broken or crushed. The cry of David recorded in Psalm 51 (see above) is symbolic of humility and penitence, and synonymous with "a broken spirit." This brokenness is necessary because it is the hard or stony heart that does not submit to the will of God.

The renewal or regeneration of the human heart means the giving or "implanting" of new spiritual life. It is God's giving of a new heart direction. The regenerate heart no longer directs from a sinful orientation; rather, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, who, according to the Bible, now resides within the individual, the heart sets a new direction—one that is pleasing to God.

Within the Christian tradition, regeneration is followed by conversion, the turning away from sin in repentance and turning toward God in faith. This saving faith is placed in Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe is the Son of God and the Savior of humankind. Faith as the spiritual act of full-bodied commitment of the whole person to God and his ways is embedded in the heart, as the Apostle Paul says: "For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" (Romans 10:10). Elsewhere, Paul explains that through faith "Christ [or the Spirit of Christ]

dwells in one's heart" (Ephesians 3:17), and he argues that "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old [nature] has gone, the new [nature] has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

### **Implications for Motivation Within the School Setting**

Two assertions have been promoted thus far regarding the non-biological or metaphysical heart: 1) that the heart is the central governing agent of the person, through which the various dimensions of personality (e.g., the affective, cognitive, and the psychomotor) are directed, and 2) that the direction

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*The dynamics of the heart  
have a profound influence  
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relevance for education.*

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of one's heart is religious; that direction will be either away from God because of an inherent sinful nature, or toward God because of the heart's renewal or regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

The question to be addressed at this point is whether the religious heart as described in this paper impacts human motivation, and if it does, what are the implications?

If one accepts assertion one that views the heart as the governing center for a person, one would be forced to relate this to motivation in some way. In fact, it could be argued that the heart is the source and focal point of motivation. The second assertion makes religious claims regarding the moral direction of all human activity—the heart being the direction-giver. A person whose heart has been redirected toward God will likely act in a manner pleasing to God, while a person who remains under the influence of the sinful nature may likely act in a more self-serving manner. Again, motivation, the cause or reasons for actions, indeed appears to have a rather significant heart connection.

This understanding of the heart's importance has several implications for motivation within the school setting. Four of these implications relate to development, multiculturalism, character education, and classroom management.

### Development

A human development or educational psychology textbook that omits the spiritual or religious dimension/side/core/nature (you choose the word) is not presenting anthropological truth in a holistic manner. Teachers end up viewing the student by default as a-religious. That position is simply inaccurate. Students have been created with an intrinsic need to worship that stems from a religious heart. That need is one motivational cause for student behavior and should be acknowledged as such.

Some may say that Kohlberg's theories of moral development accomplish the same purpose. While Kohlberg's levels of moral reasoning can be useful to better understand moral decision-making in children and adolescents, they don't deal with ultimate causes. This model fails to recognize the religious heart as the governing center and moral direction-giver. Rather, the cognitive dimension is seen as the source of moral reasoning.

### Multiculturalism

Every educational psychology textbook contains a chapter on multiculturalism. The theme of cultural diversity is played out through class, ethnic, racial, gender, and language differences. Yet a dominant feature of every culture, religion, is not included. Here, too, diversity makes a difference. Teaching in a public school located in Roman Catholic Boston or Jewish Miami Beach or Mormon Utah or Lutheran Minnesota would quickly uncover the religious diversity present in North American schools. Every public school, in fact, reflects this diversity in microcosm as the student body forms a mosaic of religious beliefs, beliefs that make a difference both inside and outside of the school setting. For it is precisely the diversity of religious belief that creates the strife in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the Middle East, and creates Jonestown suicides and abortion clinic bombings.

### Character Education

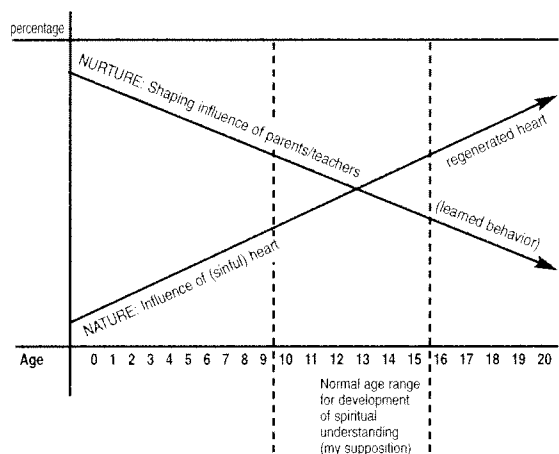
One's view of the religious nature of students has significant implications for character education. Presently, public schools are struggling to develop a generic set of values that all people can agree to, no matter what their background. Such lists include honesty, freedom, courage,

cleanliness and so on. But values must come from somewhere. Those listed, for instance, might be traced to the Judeo-Christian ethic that so influenced the founding and early development of the United States. But how does one reply to a student who asks "Why?" or "Who says so?" Without certain (religious) presuppositions, character education is likely to be a band aid where surgery is needed. The religious character of students has everything to do with what they value. It's time to acknowledge that the emperor may need a few religious clothes.

### Classroom Management

The Judeo-Christian position on the moral nature and nurture of children has implications for classroom management. See *Figure 2* below (Fennema, 1997, p.115).

*Figure 2: Influences on moral behavior: The nurture vs. nature juxtaposition.*



Note that nature, in this case sinful, has little moral influence on the newly-born child. That influence comes later through acculturation and development toward independence. In other words, intrinsic motivation is limited in young children. At the same time, extrinsic motivation is strong, which is one reason behavior modification works so well with young children. In the broad sense, the nurture or shaping influence of others is dominant with young children. But that influence decreases as children become more independent. Also note that a fertile time-period for religious belief to become personalized is between the ages

of 10 and 15. An ideal scenario might be a child being nurtured in a way that carries these values into learned behavior as an adult, combined with the religious heart being renewed by God at the age of discretion and understanding. A counter scenario might include an absence of value-laden nurture and a heart that continued to develop in its natural sinful direction with no divine intervention. This diagram shows, therefore, that several variables have implications for classroom behavior and, consequently, for classroom management.

### Conclusion

Holistic education must include the religious dimension of the student. The Judeo-Christian belief is that the metaphysical heart governs the person and provides moral direction and that the heart's relationship to God, either broken or restored, will be reflected in the morality and values of an individual. Heart is not equated with the emotions or intellect; it is seen as the governing agent and direction-giver of the emotions and intellect.

The challenge is quite simple: that educators acknowledge within their textbooks and classrooms that there is, indeed, a religious side to life, one that affects both the way students are viewed and the way business is conducted in the classroom. Then, and only then, will holistic education be truly holistic.

### ENDNOTES

1. The Bible speaks to this issue in both the Old and New Testaments: "They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth.' They have turned their backs to me and not their faces" (Jeremiah 2:27); and "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised" (Romans 1:25).

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