George Johnson:  
Policy Maker for Catholic Education

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Social and Cultural Context

The context of George Johnson’s contribution to Catholic education was United States Catholicism in the years from 1920 to 1950. The Catholic Church had been committed to establish Catholic schools since the Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1888. These schools were to protect the faith of Catholic immigrants in a predominantly Protestant culture that Catholic leaders viewed as inimical to the faith of the immigrants. The formation of Catholic identity was entrusted largely to these schools, which also were to preserve a distinctive Catholic culture. The efforts of leaders were consumed with finding support for these schools as well as training people to lead and teach in them (Veverka 1988, 1993).

Opposition to Catholic schools increased after World War I. Anti-Catholic nativism focused on attacking Catholic schools for promoting values that were perceived as counter to the national democratic tradition. In response state legislatures designed measures to control Catholic schools through the regulation of the curriculum of the schools as well as teacher training and certification. The state of Oregon in 1923 passed a law banning all non-public schools in the early grades. Catholic educational leaders went on the defensive and attempted to meet the challenge by showing that their schools were educationally the same as public schools, except for the teaching of religion.

Catholic leaders breathed a sigh of relief when the Supreme Court in 1925 overturned the Oregon school law and asserted the rights of
non-public schools to exist. After this decision Catholic educational leaders doubled their efforts to foster the opening of schools and attended to making these schools competitive educational institutions. They also grappled with issues such as the distinctive identity of Catholic schools, how much of progressive education Catholic schools could accommodate, how teachers and administrators might best be educated, and how these schools could make the teaching of religion a controlling factor in Catholic life. These educators were interested not only in Catholic schools but in the education of the Catholic community.

Among the leaders in this effort between the 1920s and the 1950s was Monsignor George Johnson of Catholic University and the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). Johnson labored tirelessly to improve Catholic schools. By the time of his death in 1944 the Catholic school system was a strong and vibrant force not only in the Catholic community but also in the nation. While Johnson began his career as a philosopher of Catholic education, once he became the United States Bishops’ spokesperson and policy maker he became deeply embroiled in the politics of education at the federal level. He toiled strenuously to make the schools educationally sound, distinctively Catholic, and sufficiently American. He answered charges that these schools had lost their religious identity or were socially divisive. Johnson did this at a time of general suspicion about Catholic schools and at the time when the immigrant Catholic Church was in a “ghetto period.”

George Johnson: A Short Biography

George Johnson was born in Toledo, Ohio, on February 22, 1889, and died in Washington, D.C. on June 5, 1944. He was the son of Henry and Kathryn (McCarthy) Johnson. After studying at St. John’s University, Toledo, (M.A., 1912), and St. Bernard’s Seminary, Rochester, N.Y., he was sent to the North American College, Rome, Italy, where he was ordained a priest in 1914. Following his return from Rome, Johnson served for two years as secretary to the bishop of Toledo. He then left the diocese to obtain his doctorate in education (1919) at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., under Dr. Thomas E. Shields, at this time an outstanding scholar of Catholic education. Upon his return to the diocese, Johnson served as diocesan superintendent of schools in Toledo until 1921.
The trajectory of Johnson’s career is shown in his writings and the various positions he held during his career. He wrote a dissertation in 1919 on the philosophy of Catholic elementary school. In a work of great erudition, Johnson reviewed the history and philosophy of the curriculum of schooling with special attention to Catholic schools. He manifested a thorough and sympathetic knowledge of scholarly developments in Europe and the United States. Like his mentor Thomas Shields, Johnson embraced many of the principles of the new psychology and pedagogy of the time. His entire dissertation was published over a period of two years in the Catholic Educational Review (1919-20), edited by Shields and Edward Pace at Catholic University.

Johnson succeeded Shields at Catholic University after the latter’s sudden death in 1921. Upon taking this teaching position in the Department of Education he began to address many of the curricular, administrative, and policy issues facing Catholic education, especially those concerning Catholic schools. Johnson was often asked to address gatherings of Catholic educators on such topics as curriculum reform, preparation of teachers and administrators, the teaching of religion, parent teachers groups, the role of pastors in education, and teacher shortages. Most of these talks as well as articles on other subjects were published in the Catholic Educational Review, of which he became editor. Johnson also continued the work of the Sisters College established by Shields.

In 1925 the hierarchy of the Catholic Church chose Johnson to be their major educational spokesperson as head of the Catholic Education Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). He was also named secretary general of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). He held both of these positions until his death in 1944. The premature death of Johnson in 1944 marked the end of the formal relationship whereby a professor of education at Catholic University was also head the Catholic Education Department of the NCWC (Neusse 1900, 348).

In his national role Johnson addressed such federal issues as the debate over the United States Office of Education, federal aid to schools, the centralization of schools at the federal level, the Depression Era educational initiatives of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the wartime educational initiatives of the same president, and the plan for recovery after the war. Johnson was also appointed to many federal commissions that dealt with these problems where he articulated the bishops’ opposition to many of these initiatives.
While Johnson became the chief defender of Catholic education, his reputation was that of a conciliator. He made the case for Catholic education on many occasions, and in so doing he gradually distanced himself from his earlier enthusiasm for many of the reforms of progressive education. He still accepted much of the psychology and pedagogy of the progressives but rejected what he thought were their heretical philosophical views. His progressive stance favored supplementing traditional study and recitation assignments with group discussions, field trips and projects.

A strong supernaturalist perspective permeated Johnson’s approach to education, untouched as almost all Catholic educators were at the time by the currents of liberal theology that appealed to many Protestant religious educators. Much of his work can be understood as an attempt to make the case that Catholic schools offer a distinctive philosophy of life and an education that would better serve the interests of Catholic parents and their children. Catholics and their schools were often on the attack during these years for distancing themselves from the public school movement.

Johnson was well suited to be the foremost spokesperson for Catholic education in the first half of the twentieth century. He was also well prepared to be their educational leader during the time of the Second World War. In the words of a contemporary historian of Catholic education,

Johnson was practical, pragmatic, and self-serving yet he also had strong convictions about the purposes of Catholic schooling in a free society. He combined native organizational and political skills with the intellectual drive and educational philosophy of Thomas Shields. (Walch 2003, 124)

While not the scholar that Shields was, Johnson strove to articulate a constructive policy for Catholic education. He argued for the setting of defined aims and criteria for Catholic education and for effective diocesan structures. He also endorsed “the use of objective tests and supported educational programs geared to the individual needs of the child” (McCluskey 1973, 393).

In his capacity as the Catholic Bishops’ spokesperson, Johnson served on many federal commissions. He was appointed by President
Herbert Hoover to the National Committee on Education. President Roosevelt appointed him to the following committees or commissions: President’s Advisory Committee on Education, American Youth Commission, the Advisory Committee of the National Youth Administration, the Wartime Commission of the United States Office of Education, the Advisory Committee on Welfare and Recreation, and the Committee on Problems and Plans of the American Council on Education. He has been called the organization man of Catholic education (Walch 2003, 125)

Politically astute as he was, Johnson developed close cooperation among the NCEA, the NCWC, and the educational department of the Catholic University. His work extended to establishing ties with secular organizations such as the United States Office of Education, whose establishment he had previously opposed, the National Educational Association, and the American Council of Education, on which he served as secretary. As the Bishops’ spokesperson, Johnson opposed many New Deal initiatives of President Roosevelt, mentioned above. The bishops were very wary of federal intrusion into education because ultimately this might affect Catholic schools negatively.

When the Commission on American Citizenship was founded at Catholic University by the American hierarchy in 1938, Johnson was named to its executive committee. In 1943 he was made director of this commission. He wrote the commission’s highly regarded statement of principles, *Better Men for Better Times* (1943), as well as a study of Catholic elementary school curricula, three textbooks on Bible and Church history, and many periodical articles. On this commission Johnson was responsible for the education and curricular work. He also aided in the preparation of all materials that the commission produced. From 1921 until his death he was one of the editors of the *Catholic Educational Review*. In November 1942 he was named domestic prelate by Pius XII.

One fact about Johnson not usually mentioned in accounts of his life is that he was an active member and a vice-president of the Religious Education Association. He published articles in *Religious Education*, the journal of the association, in which he made a spirited case for Catholic education. A notice of his untimely death appeared in the journal in 1944.

Johnson’s writings on all aspects of education are contained in two books and 117 articles, mainly written for the *Catholic Educational Review*.
One thing that Johnson did not do and what Shields had hoped that he would do was to complete writing the religion textbooks that Shields had begun (Ward 1947, 274).

Johnson’s contributions to education were recognized well beyond the Catholic community. An editorial in *The Evening Star* of Washington, D.C. on June 8, 1944 praised him for his dedication and commitment to education. It credited him with sponsoring a major revolution in the ideas and practices of Catholic education. Calling him a “progressive visionary,” it commended him for his talents of organization, noting that he did the work of at least three persons. The editorial called his *Better Men* an outstanding contribution to some of the larger postwar problems. It concluding by stating that

His vitality and energy were remarkable; his capacity for sustained work was unbelievable; his love for our democracy a deep and unquenchable fire, and his capacity for friendliness, loyalty and personal kindliness unlimited. His untimely and unnecessary death at 55 is a serious loss to American education. (*Evening Star* 1944, 404)

**Johnson’s Philosophy of Education**

Johnson’s first writings were on the psychological and social foundations of the curriculum of the Catholic elementary school in an attempt to discover the philosophy of American elementary school education that Catholic schools might embrace and adapt. These articles, appearing from 1919 to 1920 in the *Catholic Educational Review*, were actually his doctoral thesis at Catholic University (Johnson 1919a). Johnson exhibited a thorough knowledge of the history and philosophy of education, especially as this pertains to the curriculum of the school. He situated the philosophical basis of Catholic education in neo-scholastic philosophy, which was prominently taught by his mentor Thomas Shields, Edward Pace, and other members of the faculty of education at Catholic University. His thesis was set in the context of growing industrialization, his discontent with the present situation in the schools, and the fact that religion had been increasingly eased out of the curriculum of the public schools.

In his detailed historical survey, Johnson showed how educational ideals changed from age to age to meet new social conditions. He
reviewed the structures of curriculum in educational history beginning with the earliest forms of education and then moved to education in Israel, Greece, and Rome. He then described the main features of early Christian education and the emergence of Christian schools in the Middle Ages. All of these developments were presented as occasioned by social and religious needs of the times. The impressive influence of the Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, Catholic Reform and the rise of religious orders, and the Enlightenment were clearly described. Johnson charged the individualism spawned by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment with lessening the influence of religion in education. His historical analysis also showed that the schools have not been totally successful in adjusting individuals to the social environment, even though he admits that social forces and institutions have exercised a considerable degree of social control for what was perceived to be good for society and individuals.

Johnson recounted the history of the elementary school curriculum in the United States. He showed how the curriculum developed in response to social changes. Criticizing the formalism of education, Johnson accepted the progressive viewpoint that “the history of education reveals how the schools changed from age to age to meet the needs of society. Education is preparation for life and it is but natural to expect that the conditions of life at any time should influence educational agencies” (1919b, 528). He also noted that Catholic schools generally followed the lead of public schools in adding subjects to the curriculum.

Like other progressive educators at the turn of the century, Johnson’s analysis of education depended to a large extent on early studies in sociology and industrialization. In his view, industrialization ushered in a time when the religious character of the schools was seriously challenged and the Church’s influence over education considerably lessened. The emerging philosophies of rationalism, empiricism, and pragmatism challenged the power of religious authority and tradition. In his view, they fostered the increased secularization of society and were instrumental in reducing religion to a department of life and challenged its claims to provide people with the sole interpretation of the meaning and purpose of life.

Also, like progressive educators of his time, Johnson grappled with the remarkable advances in the science of psychology. He entered the
debate over the serious challenges to faculty psychology, which had for years buttressed the arguments for the formal discipline approach to education in which the curriculum was taught through separate subjects. Engaging Edward Thorndike, Johann Herbart, William James, and others, he sifted through the values in the new psychologies but in the end he still defended the faculty psychology as presented by the neo-scholastics. Furthermore, like his mentor, Dr. Shields, Johnson showed a fine appreciation of the psychological theories and experiments that were prevalent of his time.

While Johnson found much to admire in modern educational thought, he warned Catholic educators against totally embracing these new ideas. He did, however, accept the progressive broadening of the curriculum opposed by many Catholic educators, which now included science, vocational training, health education, democratic education, economic education, cultural education, and education for social efficiency. Not being satisfied with the progressives’ indirect approach to moral education, Johnson called for an explicit moral and religious education. For him “the relationship between religion and social life, between the love of God and the love of neighbor, between divine service and social service, should be made explicit” (1920, 21). Johnson argued that “religion is not a mere department of life; it is the meaning and end of life. Modern society will avoid ruin and desolation only in proportion as it recognizes this fact and accepts it” (1920, 20-21). He went on to make the unexplained statement that religion must be interpreted in terms of social and political life (21).

Like John Dewey and other progressive educators, Johnson wrestled with the tension between the individual and society when it comes to the aims, content, and methods of education. Like them, he was sensitive to recent research in the social sciences and psychology. He presented his own summary of his position, which deserves to be quoted in full:

We have criticized the current interpretation of the principle that education is adjustment to the environment, and postulated that adjustment, to be adequate and effective, must be an active, not a passive process. The individual is not to be fitted into society as a cog into a machine, but is to be given the power of self-adjustment, the power of individual choice based on character, which will enable him to fulfill the
requirements of society and at the same time cooperate in the raising of society to higher planes of truth and justice. This power is the cultural effect of education and can only be realized when education is dominated by broad and general, and not merely narrow, utilitarian ideals. (1920, 237)

In describing the curriculum for the Catholic elementary school, Johnson drew on the thought of John Dewey and other progressive educators, as well as Catholic educators who were influenced by the philosophy and methods of progressive education. He made the case that in order to provide a proper democratic education the Catholic school curriculum should be considerably expanded beyond the three Rs and the catechism. He stressed that elementary education was not the time for disciplinary specialization, which is in his view better introduced in adolescence. Johnson set the overall objective of elementary education as

General growth and development and the imparting of that fundamental information concerning God and man and the world which will later form the basis of mature development and reasoning, and which must be the heritage of every citizen of the United States, whether he be laborer or statesman, merchant or savant, soldier or man of peace. (1920, 242)

Johnson also included a lengthy quotation from John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, which decried excessive dependence on mechanical drill in education and called for a broadened and progressive curriculum for elementary schools.

In his description of the subject matter of Catholic education, Johnson followed Thomas Shields in including the spheres of both divine and human truths. He described the content of elementary education as “man’s Religious, Humanistic, broadly interpreted, Scientific and Industrial Inheritance” (1920, 281). For Johnson, revealed truths are the principal but not the sole source of knowledge of God, for humans also learn from the natural world through the power of reason. History in his view was extremely valuable in pointing out how people in various eras have dealt with temporal and eternal truths. Moreover, Johnson noted that valuable knowledge also comes
from probing the human heart as well as from intensive engagement with literature and the fine arts. Truth also comes from exploration by means of science and the scientific method.

Johnson stressed that care should be taken to develop the various faculties of the child, such as feeling, emotion, imagination, memory, intellect, and will, through education. Genuine knowledge can also come through participation in plays and dramas. Another essential learning process is the development of habits in education and life. The use of memory should be cultivated. He emphasized that efforts should also be made to engage the interests of students, an essential tenet of educational progressivism. While not neglecting the formation of values and ideals through preaching, Johnson pointed out that the formation of good habits occurred more often by placing powerful models before children.

To the progressive discussion of ideals, interests, and values, Johnson added religion as the first place to look for high ideals to place before children. He defined the aim of Christian education, adapted from Shields, as “transmitting to the child knowledge of God, of man and of nature, and fostering the proper intellectual, habitual and emotional reactions to this knowledge” (1920, 301). Johnson proposed means of achieving this broad end. He set efficiency in religious knowledge and practices as the principal means. Moral training for all spheres of life is a second means of achieving the ultimate purpose of education, which is conformity with the will of God for the purpose of saving one’s soul. Efficiency in one’s care of the body through physical education, economic, or occupational efficiency, good citizenship, and preparation for leisure time are other important avenues of education. Here Johnson is referring to the Cardinal Principles of Education, which was an important statement embodying the aims of progressive education.

What Johnson actually did was adopt the progressive’s philosophy of elementary schools to which he added the teaching of religion. Both he and his mentor Thomas Shields advocated progressive methods in teaching religion. This is treated in another section of this chapter. Not all educators in the Catholic community were in accord with what these two men proposed.

In Johnson’s last word on progressive education, he came to an ambivalent conclusion (1940a). He felt that even though progressivism is a theological heresy in its denial of the supernatural, a philosophical heresy in denying the ultimate principles of truth and morality, and a
pedagogical heresy in rejecting scientific evaluation and common sense, it has rightly drawn attention to weaknesses in educational practice and contains some essential truths. It is right in protesting

Against the regimentation, the standardization, the routine and the artificiality that have been concomitants of our effort to provide and administer an education that would reach all the children of all the people. (1940a, 258)

Furthermore, he also praised progressive education for its emphasis on the principle of learning by doing, self-activity, a broadened curriculum, manual training, and physical education. In another article, Johnson contended that the activity method originated in classrooms and “was not the product of Dewey's pragmatism and instrumentalism and is not inextricably bound up with what he holds concerning the nature of truth and morality” (1941a, 71).

The Preparation of Educators for Catholic Schools

The preparation of educators, both teachers and administrators, was a recurrent theme for Johnson. In speaking to priest-superintendents of Catholic schools, he made the case for an extensive training, beyond what priests received in their seminary formation. He advocated their learning a practical philosophy of education, different from the seminary philosophy course, which would include knowledge of the laws of learning from psychology and familiarity with the burgeoning social sciences. Superintendents should be well grounded in the theory of education, which he defined as “the application of philosophic, social, and psychological principles to the problems of the school” (1920a, 131). Johnson advocated a pedagogical course in seminaries that would include knowledge of administrative and teaching methods as an essential part of seminary education.

Johnson (1922) was aware that teachers in Catholic schools needed supervision if they were to be properly prepared for their roles. In this article, he described the character of supervision. Supervisors should come from the ranks of the teachers, be properly prepared for this position, visit classrooms with regularity, offer suggestions, and oversee testing of students. Johnson urged pastors of parishes to involve
themselves in overseeing the functioning of schools. Pastors should work with the superintendent of schools as well as the principals. He urged them to keep abreast of educational developments.

Johnson recognized that teachers needed proper preparation for their multiple tasks. They would have this if they possessed the requisite scholarship, teaching skills, and holiness of life (1924b). To hand on a culture, teachers have to be in possession of it. Teachers deal with the roots of all knowledge, especially with the fundamentals of academic disciplines. To hand on this human heritage and culture they must have the pedagogical skills that come through training and practice. Catholic school teachers also need something deeper than personality; they need holiness of life. For Johnson teachers are measured by their “approximation to Christian perfection” (389). He urged teachers to a life of prayer in which

> our fainting spirits are refreshed, our minds clarified, our charity enkindled, our patience fortified, and all in all we are made more worthy and ready for the sacred task of teaching little children. Better fewer degrees than fewer prayers. (389)

At the 1921 meeting of the Catholic Educational Association Johnson presented a plan for teacher certification (1920b). He advocated that Catholics establish a standard system of certification that would include everything that is required for teachers in the public schools. This necessary step would defend the Catholic school system from a growing number of critics who wanted to enforce state certification for Catholic school teachers. While Johnson recognized the rights of the state in certain areas, he thought that certification to teach in Catholic schools should be in the hands of church authorities in each state. He also made the suggestion that the different certification approaches for Catholic school teachers should be coordinated through the Catholic Educational Association or through Catholic University.

With the growth of Catholic schools in the 1920s, a teacher shortage in religious teachers developed. There was a movement for bringing more lay teachers into Catholic schools. Johnson discussed the pros and cons of such a situation, including finances, proper training, and religious presence, and was ambivalent about these new circumstances (1921).
Johnson's articles drawn from his dissertation have some criticisms of elements of progressive education. However, by 1922 when he had taken a position at Catholic University and was deeply involved in the preparation of Catholic school educators he expanded his criticisms of progressivism in education. What disturbed him most was that many Catholic teaching sisters were pursuing their teacher education in secular universities rather than in Catholic institutions. In “Trying to Serve Two Masters” (1922), Johnson decried the increasing secularization of public schools in the country as well as the absence of teaching of religion in these schools. For this he blamed the philosophy of pragmatism propounded by John Dewey. He also rejected Dewey's statement that faith in education is as good a religion so long as it does not become dogmatic and ritualistic. Johnson warned against the influence of such schools as Teachers College, Columbia, and the University of Chicago, which trained many public school educators. Admitting the legitimate right of the state in the area of education, he stressed that the ultimate purpose of Catholic education was “to teach the religion of Jesus Christ, to contribute to the sanctification of souls, and to prepare them for citizenship in the Kingdom of God” (1922, 462). He ended this strongly phrased article with a call for what was one of his principal tenets: the establishment of a Catholic standardizing body that would oversee and coordinate Catholic schools. For him the task ahead lay not in the attempt to conform to secular standards, derived from a secular philosophy of education but [in the attempt] to work out a system of standards that are inherently Catholic, and then present it to the state as evidence of what we are doing. Such a method would satisfy the rightful claims of the state and at the same time preserve the religious character of our schools. (463-64)

This article is the first of many that showed the ambivalence of Catholic progressives who adopted the methods of progressives but distanced themselves from its philosophical principles. Dewey and the progressives received more negative criticisms here than in Johnson's dissertation and in some later articles (1922, 457-64). In responding to criticism of elementary school teaching in the popular press, Johnson laid out a plan for the self-improvement of teachers through greater
scholarship, familiarity with modern methodology, and attention to the 
spiritual lives of children (1924, 385-89); “Sanctity, scholarship, 
teaching skills-a triple goal worth striving for” (389).

Johnson (1924b) built the case for a philosophy of Catholic 
education that accepted many ideas of the progressives but gave greater 
attention to the role of religion in the curriculum. In reviewing the 
curriculum theories of leading progressives such as Boyd Bode, Franklin 
Bobbitt, and William Charters, he argued that their theories lacked the 
integrating factor of religion in the curriculum. He urged Catholic 
educators to highlight the importance of religion rather than follow 
progressive ideas blindly. Johnson concluded that Catholic schools exist 

for the purpose of developing in our children Christian 
character. Our schools exist for the same reason that the 
Church exists, to bring individuals unto the knowledge and 
the love and the service of God. Out of this all else flows. But 
we have to direct the application. A rather definite task, it 
would seem to be, if carried out in the light of the Truth unto 
which we are dedicated. (450)

Soon after becoming the U.S. Bishops’ spokesperson on Catholic 
education, Johnson began to worry that Catholic education had lost its 
soul and distinctive spirit. He commented:

The pressure of the moment has often led us into compromises 
which, though they may not have injured us fundamentally, 
have, nonetheless, impaired our destined effectiveness. We 
have been forced by circumstances to follow where we should 
have led, to imitate where we should have provided the model. 
We have accepted curricula, methods and devices born of a 
secular philosophy of education and trusted the atmosphere of 
our schools to “Catholicize” them. We have been a bit too 
prone to emphasize the points wherein we resemble secular 
education when we should have been proclaiming the elements 
of difference. Or, perhaps at a time when we have raised our 
voices in condemnation of educational trends, we have offered 
nothing positive and, as a consequence, have failed to wield an 
influence commensurate with our importance. (1929b, 4)
After the Oregon decision affirming the right of non-public schools to exist, Johnson gave a major talk at the meeting of the Catholic Educational Association charting the road ahead for Catholic educators. Johnson (1925b) saw a warning in this decision which also asserted the states’ rights in education to supervise all schools to ensure that children in them receive the education to which they are entitled. For Johnson this called for a strengthening of Catholic schools. He proposed that all dioceses should have superintendents of education. Teacher training must be a high priority with the introduction of certification of teachers based on the principles of Catholic philosophy of education. The curriculum should be reformed in light of the best thinking on what educational should entail. Johnson called for constructive thinking in all areas and chided Catholic educators for being overly defensive. In this article he also advocated more research and experimentation for Catholic education. He highlighted

The need for courageous and intelligent workers, thoroughly grounded in the principles of Catholic philosophy, trained in the methods of modern educational science . . . who will be free to conduct experiments of a research character either in individual schools or in individual school systems. (394)

Johnson and the Teaching of Religion

As would be expected, Johnson wrote a great deal about the teaching of religion in Catholic schools. Here he followed in the footsteps of the work of his mentor Thomas Shields as well as Edward Pace. Johnson began his treatment of teaching religion with a series of articles in the 1920s. These articles brought to a more popular audience ideas first presented in his dissertation.

Finding the basic principles of Catholic education in the supernatural teachings of Christ and his Church, Johnson advised that, “they should yield a fundamentally different education than that suggested by principles of education based on naturalism and materialistic philosophy” (1925a, a 267). However, this education should not minimize the importance of fundamental skills and knowledge needed throughout life. He gave this as the aim of the Catholic elementary school:
To provide the child with those experiences which are calculated to develop in him such knowledge, appreciations, and habits, as will yield a character equal to the contingencies of fundamental Christian living in American democratic society. (260)

Thus, the formation of moral character is central in the educational task. Character is promoted through engagement in activities demanded by religion or our fundamental relation to God. These activities include knowledge and worship of God; respect for oneself by growing in virtue, culture, health; earning a living; and respect for others through affection, common interests, and humanity. Finally, character includes a respect for nature by using it properly.

In an article for Religious Education, at the time almost exclusively a journal for Protestant educators, Johnson (1929a) described the Catholic Church’s approach to character education, which was then a burning concern among educators in the United States, given that religion was no longer taught in the public schools. He argued that the life of faith must include a life of action in accordance with belief. In his view, Catholic education attempts to avoid the danger of Quietism, which contends that human activity is useless and that all moral action depends on God. It also tries to avoid Naturalism, according to which human activity alone can achieve the formation of moral character. Johnson wrote of character education that it should entail “a definite and specific plan for translating truth into terms of daily conduct,” but he favored such education only if it is “rooted in faith and Jesus Christ” and hopes to achieve its ends with his cooperation (55).

Johnson went on to describe some of the ways the Catholic Church has promoted character education: frequent Communion for the young, participation in the liturgical life of the Church, the layman’s retreat, and newer methods of teaching religion such as the Sower Scheme of Canon Drinkwater in England, the Munich Method of teaching, the Montessori Method, and the religious education program and textbooks of Thomas Shields.

In an article in a Catholic educational journal Johnson made the case for character education as fundamentally an ascetic element in education, believing as he did that the Catholic outlook is fundamentally ascetical. For him, adjustment to the environment
should take place only within this dimension of Catholic education. This included for him the teaching of practical asceticism in the classroom, which should find its expression in the discipline of the classroom. Further, it should center on the person of Jesus and the celebration of the Mass, an examination of one’s life before God, and prayerful meditation. The child should be taught forms of asceticism that can be practiced in the home through the daily recitation of prayers. What Johnson presented here was the character formation found in seminaries and religious novitiates (Johnson 1928a). In other articles in the same volume he advocated education for humility (1928d), learning lessons from church architecture (1928c), and practical means for teaching children to meditate (1928b).

Johnson (1926a) asserted that the fundamental principles for the teaching of religion were derived from the scientific psychology and pedagogy of John Dewey and Maria Montessori as applied to teaching religion by Shields. For him the fundamental principle of all pedagogy in religion as in all other subjects as well is that “the learner must do his own learning” (Johnson 1926a, 458). While Johnson recognized that many religious educators resisted the application of scientific pedagogy to the teaching of religion, he contended that in teaching religion the law of self-activity must not be ignored. It was not enough to appeal to students’ imagination and memory, which could easily result in passivity on the part of students. The teaching of religion was to be governed by “the first principle of general method, and the first principle of general method is that we learn by doing, by self-activity, by experience” (1926a, 459). To know religion it is not enough merely to know something about it. Children need ideas that will generate love that leads to the service of others and the acquisition of virtue. Learning is to proceed by way of students’ assimilating knowledge within themselves. Furthermore, learning by experience needs to be adapted to the various stages of the child’s mental development. For the young child this is accomplished through excursions, pictures, specimens, the sand table, clay modeling, and other means (460). Older children should use the catechism merely as an outline to be supplemented by collateral learning from books and activities. Children in the upper grades could be afforded opportunities for the independent study of religion. Johnson gave examples of these forms of learning from his experiences in the Thomas Edward Shields Memorial
School, which was attached to Catholic University. At this time he was the director of the school as well as a professor at the university.

Johnson recognized that teachers were generally more interested in learning methods of teaching than they were in discussion of aims. Yet he stressed the importance of both as well as content. He summarized aims in teaching religion as knowing, feeling, service, and practice. He faulted educational theorists who thought that knowledge automatically leads to virtue. The importance that he gave to the discussion of aims in education comes through in these words:

Truth is best learned by experience: knowing and doing go hand in hand. Religious truth, prescinding of course from the operation of divine grace, is learned by the same law. Thus learned, it leaves its trace not merely in the intellect, but in the will, the emotions, the impulses, the desires, in a word, the whole person. It becomes permanent and dynamic in the habits of the individual, in his attitudes and appreciation, not merely in his memory. It identifies itself with him and becomes the differentiating element in his conduct and personality. It defines him. (Johnson 1927, 563)

In an article on liturgy, Johnson (1926b) anticipated the catechetical movement of the 1960s with his advocacy of the educational value of the liturgy. Liturgy for him was neither a subordinate element in the teaching of religion nor merely a means for teaching religion but rather the very basis upon which the teaching of religion should be founded. He coupled liturgical experience with natural experience as starting points of religious education. Johnson decried the passive way in which many participated in the liturgy, even quoting John Dewey’s description of experience as both passive and active in which “when we experience something, we act upon it. We do something about it. Then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to a thing and it does something to us in return” (Johnson 1926b, 529). Pointing out the educational value of living the liturgical year, he stressed the emotions and values that its celebration inculcated in participants. The sacraments of the church make the events of daily life holy. Johnson explained how as children aged their appreciation of liturgy could grow through age-related instruction. He
even advocated special Masses for children in which the liturgy, especially the sermon, is accommodated to their understanding. All in all, Johnson pointed to the liturgy as providing excellent opportunities for the objective or object teaching of religion that many educators advocated.

In an article in *Religious Education*, Johnson defended the Catholic Church’s religious education against the charge of indoctrination by contending that indoctrination in religion is as good a thing as indoctrination into patriotism or mathematics. For Johnson, since what the Church teaches is infallible,

> It makes no apology for indoctrinating the minds of children, nor does any other religious body that takes its religion seriously. Strange that it should be perfectly satisfactory to indoctrinate children in patriotism, arithmetic, spelling, and any other human science, but unreasonable to indoctrinate them in religion. (1930, 567)

Johnson then decried the excessive freedom, self-expression, and experimentation in religion and countered that “if civilization is to perdure, there must be some measure of indoctrination” (57). He pointed to the fact that people in adult life change their religion as an indication that indoctrination does not impair human freedom.

Most religious educators today would not subscribe to Johnson’s views about indoctrination. The Vatican II document on religious freedom makes it clear that faith is to be a free decision on the part of the believer. Philosophers of education have written extensively on this complex issue and call attention to various factors in their discussions of indoctrination: one’s intention in teaching, the content of what one teaches, and the manner in which one teaches (Snook 1972). Indoctrination has become a pejorative word among most educators including religious educators.

Like many religious educators in his day, Johnson decried that religion was not taught in the public schools. For him, its omission was a primary reason for the social and moral ills of the nation. He pointed out that most countries in the world include religion as a subject in the school curriculum. For Johnson, that religion is not taught in schools leaves children with the impression that “religion . . . is something apart
from life, something not vitally necessary; something that is more or less of an unnecessary burden” (1932, 516). Finally, Johnson argued that young people need the strength of religion to make their way through life’s problems.

Johnson on Education and War

In a commencement address at Trinity College, Washington, D.C. on June 5, 1944, Monsignor George Johnson, the leading voice for Catholic education in his era, attacked the pragmatism that pervaded United States culture at that time, with the Second World War coming to a close. He decried that

We are counseled to arrive at conclusions about things in general and the present state of human affairs in particular in a realistic manner, [that] we ought to be realistic about the war, realistic about the peace, realistic about matters social and economic, realistic in the sphere of domestic relations, realistic about the truth, realistic about morals. (Johnson 1944b, 407)

For Johnson this objectionable form of realism called for the sacrifice of principle for expediency; capitulation to circumstances; justification of means by their ends; minimizing the role of justice and right in the affairs of nations; neglecting the rights of small nations; and a denial of the hope that “out of all the horror, the waste, and the destruction of war there will emerge a world in which the weak will not be at the mercy of the strong” (1944b, 408). Johnson also challenged the doctrine of unconditional surrender as not squaring with the Christian canons of mercy. Many of these opinions were not popular in days replete with trumpet calls for loyalty and patriotism, especially in the midst of a war that the vast majority of the people judged to be just. In this speech Johnson no doubt had in mind the baneful consequences of the political realism and even the Christian realism of many defenders of the war.

Johnson countered this prevailing doctrine of realism with a philosophy of life and an educational philosophy that centered on the teaching of Jesus and supernatural truths, which emphasized the enduring value of Christian truths even in the time of a war generally viewed as a
“good” and just war. Near the end of this talk Johnson was stricken by a heart attack, the cause of his death a day later. This premature death at the age of fifty-seven was lamented not only in the Catholic community but also among members of the Religious Education Association, which chose him as its first Catholic vice-president and called him “a great churchman, a man of scholarly mind and friendly spirit . . . [who] left a rich legacy of fruitful labors (1944a, 204). The last words he uttered were that “we still have a lot to learn about educating unto Christ in a world that knows not Christ” (1944b, 411).

Johnson came to his final judgments about certain policies concerning the war through his involvement in educational endeavors that were first initiated by Pope Pius XII and the United States Bishops.

In 1938 at the beginning of hostilities in Europe, Pope Pius XI asked the Catholic University of America to establish a Commission on American Citizenship. The Rector of the University organized such a commission, comprised of 141 members, both Catholics and non-Catholics. The Commission was headed by Johnson and Monsignor Frederick J. Haas, both on the faculty of the Catholic University of America. In time Johnson became executive director and the chief moving force in this endeavor (Johnson 1944a).

The purpose of the commission was to bring Catholic social and economic teachings to bear on Catholic educational endeavors, especially through the development of new curricula for schools and colleges. The context of the work of the commission was the emergence of totalitarian social theories such as Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism. With Robert J. Slavin, professor of philosophy at Catholic University, Johnson wrote the commission’s statement of principles, Better Men for Better Times (1943) and directed the publication of textbooks.

What was happening in the world in the 1930s and 1940s finds expression in Johnson’s writings as early as 1935. Addressing university graduates he reviewed the basic theological teachings of the church, especially the doctrine of Original Sin, in calling their attention to the relationship between religion and daily life. He called into question the false individualism that resulted in class hatred, international anarchy, and the destruction of sacred freedoms. He pointed to the Catholic theological synthesis as necessary “if civilization is to survive, and no such stop-gaps as dictatorship, planned economies, or international
leagues based on the trading interests of selfish interests against selfish interests can take its place” (Johnson 1935, 519). Confident of the truth of Catholic theology, he asked these educated Catholics to bring this teaching to bear on the political, social, economic, and cultural problems arising in the world.

As an educator, Johnson (1937b) stressed that religious education should always involve itself in political, social, and economic realities without losing sight of its spiritual mission. Before a gathering of educators Johnson addressed the possibility of war in the midst of the social, political, and economic insecurity of the times. Economic ills in the country and the rise of dictatorships in the world caused him to observe that “all of us stand in constant dread lest sober thought yields places to bitter controversy and that before we realize it the whole matter will be proposed to the cruel and futile adjudication of war” (1937b, 258).

In a sermon at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City on September 15, 1940, Johnson addressed the duties of teachers in the defense of American democracy. In this sermon he contrasted the enterprise of education, which is a peaceful undertaking of noble and beautiful things, with the present atmosphere of the world in which war had already begun in Europe and in which defense preparations were being made in the United States. While he insisted that the school “could not, and should not, lose complete sight of the realities of the world in which it operates” (1940b), he went on to point out that

As far as education is concerned, peace is the portion of its inheritance and apart from peace its aspirations are nugatory. It must hold fast hopes and refuse to admit that there can be nothing save wars and dissensions. It must learn from the present sad condition of the human family, the tragic consequences that result when the spirit of man loses its way, and must address itself to the heartbreaking task of finding that way anew. (450)

Johnson expressed concerns for the effects that defense buildup and the preparation for the drafting of young men would have on national endeavors, including education. Thinking only about war would affect college admissions, and the supply of skilled workers for the work force, and produce an attitude of thinking and talking only
about war. He feared that defense was being defined too narrowly in military terms and called for defending America by “means of a dogged, untiring, uncompromising offensive against forces like selfishness, greed for power, and greed for wealth, love of pleasure and love of ease, refusal to admit the fact of our creaturehood and the deification of our whims and desires” (451).

For Johnson, education defended democracy by inculcating respect for human personality and recognition of basic human rights. He found the most satisfactory basis for these beliefs in the spiritual nature of human beings. Thus, for him the religious dimension of education should be an essential dimension of an education for democratic living that could ward off the threat of totalitarianism in many countries in the world. Education for democracy as he conceived it must also recognize the roots of human injustice that are in the hearts of humans and must also use the strength of religion to uproot these seeds. The education that can accomplish this is one that inspires learners through active methods to live the truth.

Johnson addressed the war again in 1941 before the National Catholic Educational Association (1941b). Speaking on “Our Task in the Present Crisis,” he accepted the fact that entrance into the war was inevitable with the build up of armaments and shifts in the United States economy. For him, however, “something new, something different will have to go into the making of our future citizens if they are to meet what is ahead of them intelligently and bravely” (257). He also predicted that “our greatest problems will emerge only when the war is over, and it is then that educators will need to muster all the vision and all the adaptability of which they are capable” (257).

In this address Johnson discussed the upcoming draft of men, the role of women’s colleges in the war effort, problems with the employment of youth in the defense industries, and the expansion of federal activities. Johnson also treated the touchy issue of teaching citizenship in schools. For the courses that had already been introduced, he argued that training of the will should go hand and hand with training of the mind, quoting Aristotle’s dictum that “knowledge avails little, if anything, toward virtue.” In his view democratic education is predicated on the fact that individual human personality is sacred and inviolable, a truth that must be rooted in affirming the existence of God. With what now might be regarded as infelicitous wording he asserted
that individuals “must be made subject to restraint and regimentation in
the name of the common good” (259).

During the month of October 1941 Johnson gave four radio
addresses on the Catholic Hour on the practical aspects of patriotism.
He called for a renewed patriotism in the face of attacks on United
States democracy, which in his view had shown some weaknesses in
economic and political life. He placed patriotism within the practice of
the virtue of justice, which includes those duties we owe to our fellow
humans by reason of the fact that we share with them the same
homeland, cherish the same ideals, and live under a government that
protects and fosters our common interests (Johnson 1941c).

In these talks Johnson discoursed on the role of patriotism in the
home, the community, and in leisure activities. Civilian defense for
him meant first of all that homes of the people were worth defending,
citizens should contribute to the well being of their communities by
aiding the needy and combating intolerance, communities should be
socially controlled, and leisure activities should strengthen and re-
create individuals. The guiding principle of patriotism for him is that
citizens should work together for the common welfare. Nothing is
found in these addresses on the role that criticism and constructive
dialogue might contribute to a democratic way of life.

Johnson’s loyalty to the war effort at that time was manifest in his
1942 report to the NCEA membership, in which he explained that

Catholic education has a vital stake in the outcome of this war. The
forces that are arrayed against our country are at the same time
forces that in other lands are arrayed against the church. . . . Our
schools and colleges do not live in a vacuum; they are part and
parcel of life and living and were never intended to afford a
cloistered refuge from reality. Though they thrive best in peace, they
must now gird themselves for war. When freedom was imperiled
their very reason for existence hangs in the balance. (1942, 75)

Johnson and Better Men for Better Times

When the Commission on American Citizenship was founded at
Catholic University by the American hierarchy in 1938, Johnson was
named to its executive committee and in 1943 he became director of
this commission. Johnson was the principal author of the commission’s highly regarded statement of principles, *Better Men for Better Times* (1943).

*Better Men for Better Times* formulated the principles of Catholic social teaching in a practical manner to be of benefit to teachers in the Catholic schools. It presented a vision of what responsible citizenship should be in a time of crisis. *Better Men* couched praise for American democracy with recognition that there are dark chapters in our history including slavery and civil war. It realistically pointed out that

> Oppressions have been wrought under the Stars and Stripes; they are being wrought today—which only proves that true democracy envisaged by the men who laid the foundations of our government and our nation, is not something that happens automatically. (4)

Despite these and other failures, including dislocations during World War I and corrupt politics, *Better Men* offered praise for American democracy for bringing about prosperity, a high standard of living, and good schools: “Often we have been stupid, frequently intolerant, and now and then vicious, but in the main we have been kind to one another (7). The authors made the case that the military defense build-up should not neglect the many ills that beset the nation: malnutrition, bad housing, unemployment, preventable physical illness, lack of security, starvation wages, sectionalism, discrimination, neglect of higher values, and irreligion (35).

The work called for broadening the social mission of the Catholic Church to embrace everything in life and urged Catholics to work as good citizens with all persons of good will. This went counter to the widespread practice of the time which often had the Catholic Church remaining within its own confines and refusing to cooperate with others, especially other religious groups, for fear of fostering religious indifferentism.

*Better Men* was sensitive to the danger of the state overreaching its powers in times of emergency in the name of national defense. It quoted the words of Pope Pius XII:

> No one of good will and vision will think of refusing the State, in the exceptional conditions of the world of today,
correspondingly wider and exceptional rights to meet the popular needs. But even in such emergencies, the moral law, established by God, demands that the lawfulness of each such measure and its real necessity be scrutinized with the greatest rigor according to the standards of the common good. (91)

Adherence to the moral law and the Constitution are thus considered necessary to maintain freedom.

Education is presented in the book as playing an important role in the making of a world fit for human living. Education is essential to national welfare and the first arm of defense. Education provides the experiences necessary for the development of ideas, attitudes, and habits essential for democratic societies. It takes place in all areas of human life where persons come together to influence one another. Schooling is conscious of itself, since it is an intentional activity.

Better Men explains that education is the result of self activity, learning by doing. Education is described as an active not a passive process, which has experience as its basis. The authors make the case that education takes place whenever we cooperate with the grace that is in us and with the guidance and instruction to aid persons to exercise their own “power into acquiring a fuller measure of the truth, a deeper love of the good, and a finer appreciation of the beautiful” (14-15). Education should include the training of the mind and will. The best way to train the mind is to face it with real problems and to give it the opportunity and the freedom to solve them.

With regard to his attitude toward the war, Johnson must be understood within the context of the Catholic Church in the United States, which had basically a defensive and apologetic stance vis-à-vis Protestant America. At that time Catholics still had to prove that they were not controlled by a foreign power and thus could be loyal citizens. Also, Johnson was a member not of a peace church but of a church that over the years honed a doctrine of just war that more often than not ended up favoring whatever the nation’s leaders decided. While within this Church Johnson was an educational progressive, he was not a theological liberal in the United States church at the time.

At the center of Johnson’s writings about the war is the issue of citizenship and patriotism. Though in some of his sermons and addresses the patriotic citizen is loyal, obedient, and conforming, the
full corpus of his writings shows a more critical form of citizenship, which emerged as the war progressed and its moral ambiguities increased. While he admits the value of social control, he raised issues about what citizens and educators of citizens should do in times of national crisis.

Johnson makes us think about the nature of citizenship in the time of war, and about how educators deal with this complex issue. Religious education is equipped to deal with critical citizenship since it deals seriously with the tension of loyalty to a tradition and continuous questioning and critiquing of that tradition. At its best it “employs inquiry and debate, is sensitive to controversial issues and . . . is rooted in beliefs which motivate people to action” (Watson 2004, 263). Since religions transcend national borders, they are able to focus on responsibilities of global citizenship. Religious education has the potential of encouraging ethical indignation, respecting spiritual, moral, and ideological diversity, and encouraging dialogue.

George Johnson’s Achievement

Of the three priests from Catholic University studied in the last three chapters George Johnson did the most to shape the direction of Catholic education in the United States. He began as a philosopher like Edward Pace and Thomas Shields, and Catholic philosophy of education always had a place in his many talks and articles. But once he became the national voice of Catholic education, he became embroiled in all the education debates within the church and indeed within the nation. It was he who made the argument for the distinctiveness of Catholic schools, walking a fine line between those who wanted to keep the schools segregated and removed from general education reforms and those who wanted to accommodate more of the progressive education agenda. He defended the schools against the charge that they were divisive and at the same time tried to make these schools distinctively Catholic.

Johnson also had to deal with the twofold social responsibilities of the schools at this time, as described by Veverka (1985, 75): to Christianize America and to Americanize Catholics. Since public schools had eliminated the teaching of religion, Catholic educators presented their schools as a religious and moral enterprise that kept the
United States close to their religious roots by presenting a curriculum that was permeated with religious and moral values. But other educators stressed the task of the schools to make the immigrant Catholics loyal and true citizens of the nation. This was important to offset the criticisms level against Catholics and their schools.

Johnson also found himself in a paradoxical situation with regard to the federal government. As the U.S. Bishops’ spokesperson, he argued against centralization of the nation’s schools through a federal office of education, standardization of curriculum and teacher certification, and various federal initiatives in education. At the same time he tried to convince Catholic educational leaders that educational should be centralized within dioceses and within the nation. While the Catholic bishops were fearful that federalization of schools would lead to a national system of education, they wanted to have centralized control over their own schools. While early in his career Johnson proposed a separate Catholic system of accreditation and standardization of education, he later had to accommodate the schools to increasing state supervision.

Veverka has aptly described the “mystified” and significant Catholic educational shifts during this period of Johnson’s leadership from isolation to participation in social and civic life, from opposition to acceptance of the state’s legitimate role in education, from local to diocesan levels of organization and control, and from schools functioning primarily as agencies of church education to schools as agencies of public education. (1985, 90)

George Johnson deserves much credit for shaping Catholic education during his lifetime. He left a legacy of Catholic schools with a distinctive religious identity and as an integral part of a democratic society. He won the respect of leaders in the field of education as well as politics at both national and state levels.