

DEFINITION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Attempting to provide a clear definition of religious education¹ has been a significant issue in the discipline “because of the many different views, opinions, and questions involved.”² A critic once stated that not even the scholarly authorities in this field are able to give a satisfactory definition to the term.³ Furthermore, Gabriel Moran states that there are even “churches in which the term is not really operative at all.”⁴ For him, this is an issue that is “overdue”⁵ in the United States especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Yet, Jeff Astley, using the term Christian religious education, defined it as “the process whereby Christian learning takes place. It often involves ‘teaching’: that is, the intentional facilitation (promotion, enabling, aiding) of *Christian learning*.”⁶ Others have defined it as:

1. “The ministry of instruction [for the experience of growth], carried on by both the language of words and the language of relationship . . .”
2. “The attempt . . . to participate in and to guide the changes which take place in persons in their relationships with God, with the church, with other persons, with the physical world, and with oneself . . .”
3. “The development by human means of human capacities for religious [Christian] response to the demands of life . . . [with the additional note that] everything that happens in a parish educates the people.”
4. “Communicating the gospel, . . . a function of the Church whereby the *laos* are nurtured, taught,

¹The term religious education is being replaced by Christian education.

²Dennis E. Williams, “Christian Education,” Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education, edited by Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 132.

³Harold W. Burgess, An Analysis of Selected Theoretical Approaches to Religious Education in the Twentieth Century (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1974), 1.

⁴Gabriel Moran, “Where Now, What Next,” Foundations of Religious Education, edited by Padraic O’Hare (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 98.

⁵*Ibid.*, 109.

⁶Jeff Astley, The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1994), 9. Note that before providing a definition, he acknowledged that there is a problem with the meaning of the term.

trained and otherwise equipped for their day-by-day ministry in God's world . . ."¹

5. "The interaction with truth and its implications for life under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, so as to affect change in the life of the learner – this change being conformity to the image of Christ."²

HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION³

The Early Church

Teachers within the early church transmitted the knowledge of Jesus Christ in stories and in more systematic discussions. Unlike the traveling charismatic prophets, teachers settled down in a community and became scribes learned in the reign of God who could bring forth both the old and the new (cf. Matthew 13:52). Their work included interpreting Jesus' career in light of the Hebrew Scriptures, collecting the remembered sayings of Jesus, reconstructing the message and career of Jesus in a teachable narrative form and applying the gospel message to particular issues. By the second century there are no more independent teachers because the episcopal ministry has absorbed the ministry of teaching. Now, all are bishops. Unfortunately, there were no truly Christian schools or theological seminaries during this time. Christian education basically depended upon secular society to teach people and clergy, to read, write, think, speak, and listen.

The Medieval Period

The medieval period runs from about the fifth century through the fifteenth century. During this period people were baptized into the church as infants and the catechetical instruction in Christian doctrine as preparation for baptism was no longer needed. Formal education was primarily given to monks and clerics who attended monastic and cathedral schools. For those who were largely illiterate, the means of communicating the faith was through images and the spoken word. In the great Romanesque churches and Gothic cathedrals, biblical scenes were carved in bas-relief for all to see. Conversely, the principal occasions for the use of the spoken word were the minimal instruction of children explaining the meaning of their baptism, the penitential rites that rose to prominence in the High

¹The above four definitions are found in William B. Williamson, Language and Concepts in Christian Education (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1970), 35.

²Beth E. Brown as cited in Williams, 133.

³For the period that covers the history of religious education from the early church through the eighteenth century to the present, I found the following source particularly helpful: L. G. McAllister, "History of Christian Education," Harper's Encyclopedia of Religious Education, edited by Iris V. and Kendig B. Cully (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), 294-304.

Transmitting the religious heritage or young boy Training Religious Education back to the Old Testament.

Middle Ages, and preaching. Unfortunately, the medieval church never developed formal structures for Christian education of the laity.

The Reformation

The Protestant Reformation began in the schoolroom and the pulpit. Most of the early Protestant leaders were significantly influenced by Renaissance humanism and expressed a central concern for the reform of education, from early catechetical training to graduate studies. Luther's smaller and larger catechisms provided the basic documents for a Protestant religious education and laid more emphasis on theology than earlier catechisms. Philip Melancthon provided directions for the reorganization of German schools, from grammar schools to university curricula.

The reformation in Geneva, under the leadership of John Calvin, also brought new emphasis on the educational ministry of the church. He began first with the formal instruction of small children and continued with the university education. On the other hand, both Roman Catholicism and the Radical Reformation reformed education by reacting to the works of Luther and Calvin and their supporters. In every case, changes in religious education were affected by politics as well as theology, by economics and social class as well as faith stance.

The Eighteenth Century to the Present

The post-Reformation period brought work and writings that have continued to influence religious education in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), bishop of the Moravian church, was an educator who devised a method of teaching Latin through the use of a picture book and the emphasis was on concrete words illustrated with pictures. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719) established the first school in France for the instruction of large numbers of children in both religion and practical skills. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) sought to bring the affection of family relationships into the school.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) and Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) urged the use of experience-oriented methods. The last two individuals affected English and American education, notably in the development of the kindergarten. Then, during the period of Protestant dominance prior to the Civil War, much of religion was under the sway of revivalism. Therefore, Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), a Connecticut pastor, suggested in his Christian Nurture that under the appropriate influences the child might be led by several stages to religious understanding, avoiding the excessive emotionalism of the revival.

History of the Religious Education Profession

In the early part of the twentieth century, a new understanding of religious education came into

being. The newly developed disciplines of sociology and psychology started to demonstrate that genuine religious experience involves the recognition of truth and values by the individual followed by a response in changed behavior. Moreover, the moral and ethical problems in society, the pressures from World War I, the growing social needs, the new approaches to Bible study, and the grading plans for organizing the Sunday School and fresh curriculum materials provided the milieu for developing new educational positions in the church.

As a result, a movement began in the early part of the twentieth-century to establish religious education as a profession distinct from theology or education, yet related to both.¹ In 1903 William Rainey Harper, George Albert Coe and others founded the Religious Education Association² which “was originally comprised exclusively of Protestant Christians but changed over the years (as its self-understanding changed) to become the ecumenical society it is today, numbering among its members Christians (Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox) and Jews.”³ Shortly after its inception, REA founded the Religious Education Journal in 1906 to promote scholarly work in the area of religious education.

In addition to the founding of REA and its journal, several seminaries and university graduate programs began establishing more closely defined programs in religious education. A certificate or diploma was initially offered by various Religious Education Departments. However, more specific degrees in religious education like master’s and doctoral degrees were eventually offered.

During this time many evangelical Christian educators were also concerned with the growing influence of liberalism on the Sunday Schools. As a result the National Sunday School Association⁴ was formed in 1945. Through NSSA the Sunday Schools of many evangelical churches were revitalized for a time. However, the members of the Research Commission of NSSA “began to concentrate more on the needs of higher education”⁵ and recommended changing NSSA’s name in 1970 to National Association

¹James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, A History of Christian Education (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 367.

²From now on the Religious Education Association will be referred to as REA.

³Reed and Prevost, 368.

⁴From now on the National Sunday School Association will be referred to as NSSA.

⁵North American Professors of Christian Education, “An Historical Perspective on NACPE,” *NAPCE History*, 22 May 2003 <www.napce.org/history.html>.

of Professors of Christian Education.¹ "The function of NAPCE is to provide fellowship and dialogue for teachers of Christian education and related disciplines who serve in evangelical Bible colleges, liberal arts colleges, and theological seminaries."² About twenty years later, NAPCE's name was slightly changed to the North American Professors of Christian Education to include members from all over North America.³

PROMINENT RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

Some of the more prominent religious educators are:

Desiderius Erasmus Like every humanist, he was persuaded that classical literature contained the sum and substance of all human knowledge which was essential to every educated man. He was also convinced that religious truth could not be reached through scholasticism and the dialectical method with which it was combined. According to Erasmus the simple practical teaching contained in the Gospels was the sum and substance of religious knowledge. In contrast to Italian humanists, he taught that the end of all education was to train boys to serve God and their fellow men.

John Colet After his successful lectures on the Epistles of St. Paul, Colet decided to abandon the scholastic method of preaching and gave a simple exposition of the meaning of the text. These lectures marked the turning point in the history of religious education in England. This brought about a great change in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Men no longer approached the Scriptures with ready made ideas which they read into the sacred text; rather, they went to the Scriptures to discover, by patient study, what they had to teach.

John Amos Comenius For Comenius, the final aim of all education is religious: "As the restoration of man to the Paradise which he forfeited, and to the image of God which he lost, is the aim of the providence of God in Christ, so the aim of the school is that restoration, a bringing of its work and methods into a harmony with moral and religious aims and subordinating the school to the Church as a Spiritual Society."⁴ His greatest book was Didactica Magna which aimed at bringing about a school reform. He thought that everybody would be able to learn as much as everybody else if exposed to the right method. Therefore, it is very important to learn to read the Bible correctly. He believed that Bible

¹From now on the National Association of Professors of Christian Education will be referred to as NAPCE.

²North American Professors of Christian Education.

³This took place between 1991 and 1992.

⁴John Amos Comenius as cited in T. F. Kinloch, Pioneers of Religious Education (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 49, 50.

reading has a technique of its own.

He was also at least three hundred years ahead of his English contemporaries by realizing the great part hymns may play in religious education when carefully selected and explained. He also believed that a child gains more through being introduced to a noble and inspiring personality than by being taught dogmatic theology. Religious education was more than instruction; it is the development of personality.

Johann H. Pestalozzi As a pietist, Pestalozzi was convinced that education must be essentially religious. His account on religious education is to be found in his work How Gertrude Teaches Her Children. According to him, there are two principles that underlie all moral training: continuity and the perfection of others. He was also convinced that the proper teacher of religion was the parent, especially the mother. His curriculum was based on the effort to cultivate the heart and mind, the one directed to love and the other to truth, and that love and truth are but two different names for God.

Jean Jacques Rousseau His ideas on education were chiefly laid down in his Émile, or Of Education. In this book he expressed that people must do away with all the impositions on the child which are mostly ideas of adults and let "nature" do its work. The tutor should guide the boy's experiences in such a way that they come to him naturally and not because some authority has told him so. The only area of experience for which he recommended complete abstinence until the questioning comes from within is religion.

Horace Bushnell He became one of the leaders of liberal theology and of a new religious education. Bushnell believed that children are discouraged of piety and hardened to good by too much prohibition. Anything that puts the child aloof from the parent, or takes away the confidence of love and sympathy, will be a wall to shut him off from God. He also tried to reconcile the secular trends of his period with the religious heritage and realized that he had to change some dogmatic elements of the Calvinistic tradition, especially its pessimism about human nature. Bushnell wanted to have common sense in matters of religion and wanted to see children encouraged rather than discouraged.

Paulo Freire For Freire, education should be the element to bring liberation to the oppressed from their social, economic and political oppression. Two particular events are used to support this liberation concept: the exodus event and Jesus' proclamation of liberation in Luke 4.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES RELATED TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

1. What specifically is religious education?
2. What are the purpose, scope, and goals of religious education?
3. Is there a difference between religious education and Christian education?
4. How is religious education different from secular education?

5. How are goals and values determined in religious education?
6. What is the relationship between theory and practice in religious education?
7. What is the role of theology in religious education?

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