

# **ASSOCIATION of PROFESSORS and RESEARCHERS in RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (APRRE)**

Charles F. Melchert and Randy G. Litchfield

## **HISTORY**

Beginning in the 1950's, the National Council of Churches helped sponsor and organize an annual meeting of the "Professors and Research Section" under the leadership of their Division of Christian Education. In 1969, that section dissolved and formed an independent group, in order to encourage participation by professors whose religious communities were not members of the National Council of Churches, including Roman Catholics and Jews. In 1970, re-organized as the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, it met for the first time in its present form, with about a hundred members. APRRE now has a membership of approximately three hundred.

The field of religious education, as a professional, scientific and scholarly activity began in the early decades of the twentieth century under the influence of formative figures such as John Dewey, William Rainey Harper, George Albert Coe, Paul Herman Vieth, and Luther Weigle, whose 1909 book *The Pupil and the Teacher* sold more than a million copies. Their efforts took institutional form in 1903 with the establishment of the Religious Education Association (REA) with which APRRE has historically had a close working relationship. George Albert Coe, who had already profoundly influenced religious psychology, significantly shaped this new movement and the theoretical and empirical research of scholars such as Hugh Hartshorne, Paul Vieth, Goodwin Watson, who created a book of case studies for teachers in 1926, and many others, helped form the field and shape its interests. This was an era of unbounded enthusiasm for the possibilities of a "scientific" approach to all aspects of religion as well as religious and public education. It was also a time of high enthusiasm for increasing the professionalism and the academic qualifications of those who teach religion both in Sunday schools and public schools. The new leaders in religious education brought the new sciences of psychology, sociology, child development to bear on educational theory and practice, and coupled it with a commitment to social reform, guided by liberal theology. The influence of liberal theology came under attack and diminished in the 1940's with the advent of neo-orthodox theology, which served as the theological underpinning for newer forms of religious education from the 1940's through the mid-1960's. Since APRRE took on its present form in 1970, no one theory or theology has dominated. Instead communitarian approaches, feminist interests, liberation theologies (Latin American and African-American), evangelical theologies, the social sciences, historical interests, more philosophically sophisticated educational theories and a renewed interest in practical theology have contributed to the scholarship and practice of religious education across denominational and religious boundaries.

## **ORGANIZATION**

The current mission of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education is to provide an ongoing forum that will enhance the quality of

teaching and research in religious education:

- a. through sharing, critiquing and encouraging publication of creative scholarly contributions to theological education, to religious studies, and to the integration of theory and practice;
- b. through ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that stimulates participants to explore fresh visions of religious education for the human family in our complex world community;
- c. through the creation of networks of communication, cooperation and support in order to strengthen the participants as professionals, and religious education as a distinctive and relevant field of study;
- d. through interpretation of the integrity of the field of religious education to the wider society and especially to graduate students and others preparing themselves to become professors and researchers in religious education in the future.

APRRE continues to meet annually as a collegial association, providing opportunity for sharing research, research methods and scholarship as well as innovative practices for education in religion in schools, churches, synagogues and temples. Every other year the annual meeting is held in conjunction with the REA. In the past, during the years APRRE did not meet with the REA, APRRE has met with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and during AAR/SBL meetings. In addition, APRRE supports the journal of the Religious Education Association, *Religious Education*, both financially and with scholarly contributions by members.

APRRE's governance includes a President, Vice-President and President-Elect, an Executive Committee, and a part-time Executive Secretary. A growing number of membership services are being provided through e-mail and the APRRE website ([www.mtso.edu/aprre](http://www.mtso.edu/aprre)). Members receive a quarterly newsletter (in addition to the *CSSR Bulletin*), periodic email updates, and access to a searchable member directory, full text of meeting papers, position openings, and syllabus sharing. Efforts are being made to support online collaboration between members on projects. Younger members and student members are eligible for travel grants, provided from funds donated by members, to assist their attendance at annual meetings.

APRRE membership consists of persons who are, or have been, "engaged professionally in the teaching of religious education" or in related subjects in institutions of higher education, individuals "directly engaged in or supervising research in religious education" (for example, in denominational offices), and graduate students preparing for such activities. Sixty-five per cent of APRRE members are in graduate departments of academic institutions (colleges, universities and theological seminaries), teaching masters and doctoral students. About twenty-five per cent of APRRE members are in undergraduate or other institutions, and 13% are retired.

APRRE membership includes Protestants, Catholics and Jews, representing a wide spectrum of theological, denominational and educational perspectives. Currently 43 different denominations and 17 countries are represented among members. This religious, ethnic, racial, ecumenical and international diversity is represented in our

annual programs and is sought in our organizational leadership.

Although a significant number of APRRE members teach in doctoral programs, members are predominantly engaged in preparing professionals (pastors, priests, religious, rabbis, and educators) who will be engaging in educational activities in religious contexts, rather than focusing on religious education as purely academic scholarship. This is also true of those members who teach in religious studies departments, some of whom have programs designed to prepare undergraduate students for service in churches who desire professional leadership in their educational programming.

As mentioned previously, APRRE has a close relationship with the REA that informs the identity of each. There is a significant overlap in the membership of the two associations because of shared concerns about religious education beyond academic settings, i.e. local and public contexts, and inter-religious issues. An executive representative from each association has ex-officio status on the other's governing group. The journal *Religious Education* is edited and published by the REA. APRRE supports the journal through annual financial support and contribution of articles from APRRE members throughout the year. One volume a year is typically focused on selected papers from APRRE's annual meeting. APRRE and the REA collaborate on conference planning. More information about the REA can be found on their website ([www.religioeducation.net](http://www.religioeducation.net)) and through Stephen Schmidt's *A History of the Religious Education Association* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1983).

## **ISSUES RELATED TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THEOLOGY**

Religious education as a scholarly field began in its early years with a profound interest in the intersection of religion and public education as well as teaching and learning in the religious community. More than eighty articles were published in the journal *Religious Education* about religion and moral values in public education from 1903 to 1920.<sup>1</sup> The public dimension of religious education has eroded. In light of "separation of church and state" issues and protests from both right and left whenever religion is mentioned in school, the public schools' preference for a strategy of avoidance rather than investment in "teaching about religion" is quite understandable. In addition, with increased suburbanization, a decrease in a "public space," an increased privatization of religion, media stereotyping of religion and depictions of it as a source of social conflict, the early insistence of educators like Coe and Alfred North Whitehead that education was intrinsically religious has gradually diminished. Despite the efforts of contemporary leaders such as Gabriel Moran to widen awareness, and interest in the "education of the public,"<sup>2</sup> religious education typically is focused on

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen A. Schmidt, *A History of the Religious Education Association* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1983), 43.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Moran's *Interplay: A Theory of Religion and Education* (Winona, Mn: Saint Mary's Press, 1981); Jack L. Seymour, Robert T. O'Gorman and Charles R. Foster, *The Church in the Education of the Public* (Nashville: Abingdon,

church and synagogue setting, which further isolates religion from the public sphere. The attention of most of APRRE's members tends to focus upon religious education as it takes form in these settings.

This narrowing of focus for religious education, together with the facts noted above about the "social location" of APRRE members, are related to one of the ongoing discussions in APRRE meetings over the years, as well as in publications by members. How best do our academic and scholarly interests fit together with our professional and religious interests?—an issue addressed in the *CSSR Bulletin* as well. There is an ongoing discussion of the relationship of academic approaches to religious matters, characteristic of universities and scholarship, and what has been called "committed" or "professing" approaches more characteristic of religious bodies.<sup>3</sup> Or to pose the question in its most familiar pedagogical form, "Are we to teach religion or teach about religion?" Not surprisingly, APRRE members experience many of the tensions familiar to academic scholars in religiously affiliated colleges, situated as they are in institutions that most often have denominational affiliations, constituencies and stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

APRRE members generally do not see these approaches as mutually exclusive but their interactions are complex and often give rise to conflict. In APRRE conversations, these concerns are often addressed in forms inescapably intrinsic to our field, "What is the nature and import of the educational dimension of our activity as it relates to the religious dimension?" In fact, often such discussions have entailed debates about what to call what we do. Are we doing "religious education" or "Christian education" or "catechetics" or "educational ministry" or "education in religion" or "education in a particular religion" or "education about religion" or "practical theology"? The list of possible names go on and on.<sup>5</sup> Each has its own implications and nuances. More recently it is "practical theology" that has claimed attention and some institutions have even substituted "practical theology" in place of a direct identification of what is being done as "education" in order to highlight the normative influence of theology on the practice. Sometimes the practical effect of this is to diminish attention to actual educational procedures. While this is a long-standing concern among religious educators, it also reflects a long-standing and unresolved issue in theological seminary

---

1984); and Mary C. Boys ed., *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., the recent articles by Terrence W. Tilley "The Misunderstood Mandatum," *CSSR Bulletin*, Vol. 30:3 (2001) and by Raymond B. Williams and respondents, "So, What Are We Professing Here? Religion, the Liberal Arts, and Civic Life," *CSSR Bulletin*, Vol. 29:3 (2000).

<sup>4</sup>Some of this turmoil and the issues entailed are aptly described recently by Wilburn Stancil, "The Religious Mission of University and Academic Freedom: An Uneasy Relationship," *CSSR Bulletin*, Vol. 30:3 (2001), 58-61.

<sup>5</sup>This article uses the term "religious education" not to ignore critiques, other options and its links with an earlier historical period, but because it is part of our Association's name.

circles as well - what is the relation of the academic study of religious subjects, which often goes under the title "religious studies," to the academic study of religious subjects which explicitly serves a religious community. Which takes precedence—the religious values or the academic values? Oft times there is no conflict, or none is perceived. Usually this issue is debated in terms of content—what are acceptable or unacceptable views on certain topics? But there are more subtle and less readily recognized versions of tensions seldom discussed. For example, some Christian theological seminaries insist that religious or theological values take clear precedent over academic values. These schools might well hold up the Sermon on the Mount as a repository of values to be emulated, including the admonition, "Judge not, lest you be judged...", or Paul's theme that the free gift of God's grace suffices and cannot be earned. Do such theological and ethical values have anything to do with grading or disciplinary practices in theological schools? Should they? Are these practices a product of the Christian community or of academic values? Do such practices communicate values to those who give and those who receive them? If so, are those values congruent with the institution's explicit theological professions?

In other words, among religious education scholars, discussions about the relation of Athens and Jerusalem, or the academy and the church or synagogue may focus less on taking positions of "neutrality" or "commitment" or "professing" in relation to some issue, and rather asking pedagogical questions such as: Do our educational procedures (in a classroom or in a congregation or synagogue, or even in the shapes and forms of a professional meeting) constitute an "implicit profession" whether or not we make explicit professions? If so, what do they profess? Are the professions embedded in our procedures congruent with or contradictory to the content of what we are teaching?

APRRE, in its annual meeting, has often discussed such issues when planning the format for presentations and collegial papers, and newcomers repeatedly comment upon the hospitality, the openness of discussion, the lack of a competitive "attack and defend" manner in responses to scholarly presentations, and the cooperative and constructive contributions from participants. Some have suggested that such interests are to be expected in a group of scholars who have chosen an arena like religious education, where teaching and learning are emphasized. People are attracted to the field because they find satisfaction in seeing and helping *others* experience the "Aha!" of understanding. Indeed, the point of teaching is not found in the teacher or in the subject, or in teaching itself, but in the learner's *learning*. To put it plainly, in our experience, for many APRRE members teaching is not ego trip, it is an "other" trip.

APRRE's interest in both pedagogical and theological commitments in institutions and teaching sometimes raises questions about how what we do and what we say fit together. A member was surprised to learn in a conversation with a philosopher of education from another country that John Dewey's approach was highly influential in that country, and constituted a significant portion of his own teaching time. When asked how he handled that material, he replied, "I lecture on it." The member was left wondering how fully that method encourages a learner to do what Dewey insisted upon:

interact with her natural and social environment, and thus to reflect upon and reconstruct her experience. Can one understand Dewey's notion of "experience" via lecture alone or vicarious experience? Or we could ask if different religions or different theologies require being taught in different manner if one is to communicate "the heart of the matter"? Are educational procedures or methods neutral? Are institutional structures neutral? Do some faculty members "serve" on committees, while "lording it over" students? Does it matter? How do the "what" and "how" fit with each other?

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

The birth of our sister association, the REA, in 1903 marked an explicit effort to ground religious education in the modern worldview and helped launch the professionalization of religious education. In many ways we move into the second century of this legacy much like its founders did—desiring to revision religious education in light of a new world, this time a *postmodern* one. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century APRRE members have in various ways addressed certain *aspects* of postmodernity such as globalization, contextual epistemology, multiculturalism, and particularity and pluralism. However, we are waiting for a robust model that engages these aspects collectively.

Religious education models in a postmodern era will probably be forced to address the following issues, among *many* others, in relation to the theological, social and educational areas in which we work. Two interesting issues in the theological area deal with religious divisions and sacred texts. To the degree that divisions between fundamentalist and liberal groups within traditions emerged as different responses to modernity, shifts to postmodern assumptions *may* facilitate redefining these divisions, including those within our field. Also the acceptance of plurality within sacred texts and the plurality of reading schemes in studying these texts raise significant issues about a central part of the content of religious education.

In the social area there are issues of power, technology, particularity, and understandings of the self. Postmodern religious education will increasingly be informed by understanding the role of power in liberating and democratic learning. There are so many profound ways that technology is shaping the content and processes of education. The internet, as just one aspect of technology, brings home issues about producing, accessing and legitimizing information; about patterning how we think in nonlinear and multitasking ways; about blurring the boundaries of canon when scripture is hyperlinked; about emerging connectional systems for new religious groupings; and redefining the relationship of seminary and parish in theological leadership education. Issues of pluralism and particularity lead many religious educators to adopt ethnographic methods as ways to engage congregational culture and epistemology. This broadens the range of cognate disciplines for educators beyond psychology and sociology. Postmodern understandings of the self as socially constructed, fluid and multiple have major implications for how religious educators understand religious maturity and development.

The educational area is increasingly diverse. The field of education is exploring

an expanding appreciation for diverse modes of learning and intelligence with significant implications for the processes of religious education. This is due partly to greater appreciation of the cultural factors in learning and of the complexity of human learning.

These issues point to an increasingly complex and challenging interdisciplinary task for APRRE members. In the years since APRRE's founding, increasingly sophisticated research methods and theoretical frameworks have been adapted to enhance our understanding not only of the educational aspects of our field, but also the social, psychological, historical, institutional, communal, multi-cultural as well as religious and theological dimensions of religious education. Increasingly, in each of our scholarly fields, specialists must be masters of many disciplines just to be able to operate effectively in one's own discipline.

The increased breadth and complexity of interdisciplinary work also has a significant impact on APRRE as an association. As members seek to increase their competencies in various disciplines, they become members of the appropriate professional group for that discipline or field of study. The result is APRRE becomes one of several professional commitments for its members. Combined with limited travel budgets and time in one's schedule, members annually must make forced choices between APRRE and other meetings. This situation is also complicated by commitments to professional groups within a member's religious tradition. These dynamics are a concern in terms of APRRE's ability to provide leadership to the field and in terms of its future vitality. APRRE, and likely other professional associations as well, will need to redefine itself as a part of a larger ecology of professional organizations.

Identity can be understood as accrued confidence, that is, a history or trajectory capable of continuing into the future. APRRE has a strong identity fashioned from engaging many challenges and changes over the years, and this is particularly true if APRRE is understood in relation to the longer tradition of the REA. This century will be an exciting time for APRRE members to face new opportunities and continually discover religious education afresh.