

Theology: The Clue to Christian Religious Education?
Questions for the Future
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“Indeed, what *is* Christian education?” Writing in 1964 Professor Sara Little offered, what she called a “near consensus” answer: “It is both a theological and an educational discipline (1964, 208).” However, arriving at this consensus had not been easy. Much anger and enormous hurt had been expended. Regretfully, after being stated so simply, much discussion was and is still needed to clarify what being both educational and theological means.

For its first 50 years, education tended to lead the field of religious education and its journal. In the last fifty, the role of theology has emerged in the partnership. Joining with Little, I believe the starting point for understanding this **partnership** is reflected in the work of Randolph Crump Miller. In 1950, he published a path-breaking book, The Clue to Christian Education. This book, along with his editing of Religious Education from 1958-1978, refined what an open and mutual theological turn could offer to Christian religious education. I will review this “turn to theology” by focusing on articles published in Religious Education during the last fifty years.¹ Moreover, I will move from this historical analysis to ask about the future for Christian religious education.

Setting the Context: Theological and Educational Conflict

Religious educators, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, were embroiled in controversy. A “scientific” educational method along with a liberal Protestant ethic had prevailed during the early years of the Religious Education Association. Persons with evangelical theological perspectives often felt excluded. Then in the late 1930s and 1940s, a Barthian-influenced neo-orthodox Christian education emerged to challenge the earlier consensus.

The conflict that ensued was heated and divisive (Seymour, 2003). For example, in his historical analysis of the “frontiers of religious education,” Kendig Brubaker Cully defined the neo-orthodox theological position in Christian religious education as “a veritable renaissance, a venture into thinking in depth.” He pointed to its “rediscovery and restatement of more ancient sources of the Christian theological tradition (489). Angus MacLean confronted religious educators even more forcefully,

¹ See the annotated bibliography, at the end of this paper, of the key texts defining the theology of Christian religious education.

In the late twenties, I made survey study of theological thought in Protestant religious education. To put it very shortly, I found that not only was their no discernable theological system, but that all the naïve and immature crudities of thought found among children. . . were paralleled in written materials (55).

Neo-orthodox educators feared a theologically immature Christian education would fail to present the saving message of the gospel. To them, reclaiming and representing the living Christian tradition was essential for transformation and salvation.

In turn, liberal educators worried about focusing theology on tradition. They feared it reestablished authority over deeper concerns of responsible and faithful action. Harrison Elliot noted that the highest calling of the religious educator was working to enhance human living. Therefore, he emphasized “human knowledge, secured through relevant research and experimentation (196).” He argued that in “human life and experience, there are creative and redemptive processes available which can be discovered, which can be utilized, and which can be trusted (198).” Education needed to look for redemptive processes, rather than be mired in past traditions. Sophia Fahs took the concern even farther, fearing that a return to tradition would obfuscate truth:

How has this continued narrowing of the content of religious education in our churches been possible in spite of our generation’s greatly expanded knowledge of man’s religious history? Simply stated, this has been done by removing the Christian historical heritage from the field of natural observation, inquiry and reasonable thought, unless the study reveals the biblical events “as the redemptive activity of God (1960, 172).

In the mid-1950s, standing between these poles of the conflict, the Yale philosopher of education, Theodore Greene, defended mutuality that united education and theology. “Religion and education must collide in mortal combat if either, and certainly if both, congeals into dogmatic self-sufficiency.” Focusing on religion, he commented, “If religion sets faith in opposition to reason it will inevitably value orthodoxy more highly than a living faith in a living god and substitute indoctrination for reasonable persuasion, training in correct beliefs for vital spiritual growth.” Yet, in turn, he challenged “scientific education” for becoming “too proud of its own intellectual and technological achievements” and thus stifling the “innate capacity for awe and reverence (84).”

The Clue to Christian Religious Education

In 1950 Randolph Crump Miller wrote The Clue to Christian Education. Even though he was critical of some educational emphases, this generous and gentle man offered theology as **the clue**. He bridged the divide in Christian religious education by offering a “relevant theology” uniting method and content (Melchert, 2002, 299). The divide between liberal religious education and neo-orthodoxy had caused a stalemate. Miller’s alternative provided a breakthrough to “a productive, almost exhilarating period (Little, 2002, 294).” He focused on our relationship to God, on faithfully honoring the tradition,

and on working to partner with God in the mending of creation. His theology was open to education.

The coverage of theological concerns increased after he became editor of Religious Education.² Miller continued the major topics of the journal, that is, purposes of religious education; social issues such as race, labor, family, and economics; religion and public schools including weekday religious education; higher education; moral and character education; pluralism and ecumenism; and comparisons of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant education. Furthermore, he complemented these with theological sources of the field, for example, options like secular theology, gendered theology, culturally specific theology grounded in black, Asian, and Latin American perspectives, and above all else, process theology. Clearly Miller bridged theology with research on human development, congregational life, and education.

Miller was a mediator, and, as any mediator, his work was criticized for being eclectic and expansive. Nevertheless, through it, educational research and theological study were engaged. Therefore, beginning with the contributions of Miller, I will examine that partnership in the pages of Religious Education and raise questions about the current state of the field.³ I will focus on the central theological issues addressed in the last 50 years:

1. the purpose of Christian education,
2. the church as the setting for Christian education, and
3. the method of Christian education.

Purpose of Christian Religious Education

Miller focused on the drama of salvation. For him, theology began with an analysis of the learner – of how we are both sinners and children of God. He did not believe that this “both/and” analysis was possible through scientific education. The goal then of Christian education and Christian evangelism was to offer “the *reconciliation* that comes through Christ (1953, 411).” He added: “unless education is the impartation of Christian *truth* it is not Christian (411).” Defining theology as “the truth-about God-in-relation-to-man (sic),” Miller focused on confronting learners with the Christian witness so they could come to know God’s grace and were then faced with a genuine choice of discerning and living obedient to God (1961, 201).

Other contemporaries writing in Religious Education complemented Miller’s focus. They too defined Christian religious education as a practice of redemption or of learning to be a servant of the redemptive God (Jackson, 387; DeWire, 429-31; Howe, 491-93). For example, David Hunter explicitly defined the purpose of Christian education as “encounter with the Almighty (6).” Such an encounter inspired the learner “to become part of a Christian process which changes culture (5).”

² A 1953 study by Reiman of articles in Religious Education did not even list theology as a topic.

³ To “protect” the reader from my convictions, I must admit that I believe that the practice of Christian religious education is a theological method and that the vocation of the educator is as theologian.

Christian education has the task of keeping central the church's mission as it relates to God's action now, but this is not to say that it can afford to neglect God's past actions nor the sure and certain hope of his future action. . . . The task of Christian education [is] nothing less than the communication of the Gospel, . . . the good news that the Triune God has acted, is acting now, and will continue to act in persons' lives and throughout all creation, while he (sic) waits and works for our response (10).

These Christian educators were convinced that education by itself could not discover the grace of God, God's offer of reconciliation and redemption, and God's call to mission and engagement. While the brokenness of the world and human condition were clear to all educators, God's offer of grace was known only in the story of redemption. They prayed that Christian education could assist persons to encounter the story of faith in such a way as to lead to lives of faith and responsibility to God and others.

Paralleling this early conversation about the revelatory power of the Christian tradition and the call for mission are contemporary concerns in Christian religious education literature for identity and the repair of the world. Recognizing the diversity embedded in the world and the pluralism of cultures, educators in the last twenty years have focused on forming of a Christian identity as central to Christian religious education (See D. Miller, Elizondo, Melchert, 1981, Richard, Brelsford, Byron Anderson). Brelsford, for example, defines the context: "I understand contemporary Western culture to be characterized by democracy, cacophony, fragmentation, creative chaos – the promise and challenges of burgeoning pluralism and diversity (175)." Identity is rooted in the unique story, tradition, and practices of the Christian faith community taught through initiation and Baptism, conversion, and living.

Identity is an embodied goal. Christian identity results in a vocation of mission or joining God in the "repair of the world (Boys)." Reflecting on the development of her own work through feminist and liberationist perspectives, Letty Russell affirms that "Christian education has to do with God's initiative and our partnership with others in an ongoing process of growth (10)." Boys, in turn, frames the task of vocation as designing and enacting "educational processes in such a way that people (1) realize the world is in need of repair; (2) believe that something can be done to repair it; (3) form a community of persons who sustain each other in the work of repairing (349-59)." Boys, as Miller before her, focused on Christian worship, and particularly the Eucharist, as the setting where identity was formed and where the mission of repairing God's world was unleashed. Yet, she added, with deep concern, "I am convinced that no matter how profound the church's teaching *about* the repair of the world, the way the church *is* the church, as the community of disciples, in the more powerful teacher (346)." Boys here directs our attention to a second key theme of Christian religious education in the last 50 years, that of the nature of the church and its role as a pedagogical setting and practice.

The Church as the Setting

The first generation of Christian religious educators were grounded and trained in the practices of the emerging field of education. In his 1953 history written during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of REA, Arthur McGiffert noted that its first leaders were practitioners from educational agencies, both professionals and lay leaders working in Sunday schools, service agencies such as the YMCA and YWCA, curriculum leaders, and public school teachers and administrators. While their dialogue was “charged” by the “methods and findings of Biblical study, the newer psychological emphasis on growth, and the shifting concept of education (McGiffert, 104),” they sought to name and expand the public settings where Christian education was practiced. In fact, a key conversation during the 1950s was about release-time education, about how schools and churches could work in creative partnership to influence both the Christian and the public education of children.

Connected to these earlier explorations of educational agencies, Miller led in developing a systematic ecclesiology of Christian education. He wrote in the Clue to Christian Education, “The way to become Christian is to enter the church (80).” Furthermore, the seminar he chaired in “Theology in Religious Education” spoke of the church as “the bearer of the ‘Revelation’ and the matrix of faith.” In fact, the participants in the seminar concluded: “Theology is mediated by the religious community, church or synagogue. It is primarily in the religious community that theological concepts are verbalized through creeds, teaching, and proclamation (Miller, 1954, 169-70).” Miller called the total parish “the means of redemption (1953, 410).”

It is a community in a covenant relationship with God. . . . It is a fellowship in which the redemptive love of God is at work through faith in Jesus Christ, and therefore its members are changed by God’s grace. It is communion with God through its worship and sacraments, and therefore members are strengthened to stand for their witness to the world. Its history is a record of change and development, and yet it turns to its biblical faith as a guide to belief and action in the present world. In such a community, the young Christian grows toward maturity and the older Christians are sustained in the continuing process of growth in grace (1961, 204).

Biblical scholars, like James Smart who edited the Presbyterian Faith and Life curriculum and Bernard Anderson, likewise turned to this communal understanding of the practice of Christian education. Smart grounded the curriculum in the church and the home. Moreover, Anderson interpreted biblical study and theology in terms of the church. He argued, the Bible “cannot be separated from the Church, that is, the people of God.” The Bible was for him “the story of a holy family in which persons may become members by an act of faith (4).” No longer was the conflict in curriculum between Bible study and life experience, because Bible study was embodied in the life experience of the community of faith seeking to be the church.

Ecclesiology is central to contemporary conversation about Christian education. C. Ellis Nelson and John Westerhoff, III have been two of the most articulate voices for a “community of faith” paradigm of Christian religious education. Combined with the work of Craig Dykstra, Charles Foster, and Maria Harris, a primary question for Christian education is how the church teaches. Or as Miller noted, “Education, when it serves religious purposes, takes on a certain hue, being colored by the fact that it is offered by a faith community (1972, 4).” Nelson asked in a symposium published in *Religious Education* “Is Church Education Something Particular?” He answered, “The general purpose of education is the same as the purpose of the church, but the particular role of education is to foster deliberate efforts to help persons in the church develop a Christian mentality (8).” An educational activity was a setting and process that communicated Christian thought and Christian ways to the end that persons embodied God’s concern for love and justice.

Many essays in Religious Education have focused on the failure of the church to embody its best, yet at the same time, each called the church to live and witness to the redemptive and gracious power of God in its midst. John Westerhoff responded to Nelson by focusing on discussions of members of the World Council of Churches where the subject of education had come to the forefront. He asked whether the church would respond to this opening: Were churches willing to seek to address how persons were educated in societies? And furthermore were church leaders really willing to look at what was wrong with their own practices of education (49)? The call was for a church to seek to be faithful and interpret the signs of the times. If the church were to be faithful, it could become a means of grace through which God’s word was heard and God’s justice practiced.

The Method of Christian Education

“Interpreting the signs of the times” is a powerful way to express the third theological issue. Summarizing Miller’s theological clue and frankly her own conviction, Sara Little noted that “Christian education has to do with the *process* of helping truth to be experienced and interpreted (Little, 1978, S-76). Thus Christian education is itself a theological method.

The 1954 seminar on theology in religious education, chaired by Miller, clarified two understandings of theology. Both of these continue today. The first expresses theology as “reflection upon religious experience. . . The theological experience is the critical inquiry into the meaning of religious experience and the biblical-historical interpretations of religious experience (Miller, 1954, 169).” As such theological analysis points people to the revelatory power in their own lives and thus “prepares them” for richer individual and communal experiences of God and God’s call. In contrast, a second view of theology is as a “body of truth passed from one generation to the next through instruction and study.” This view of theology is also applicable to human experience as it seeks to understand and clarify the ways humans are to be faithful in new times and contexts.

Theology thus, for Miller, was a dynamic process that seeks to understand the Christian witness, find meanings and expressions in human living, and faithfully call for discernment and response to God. For him, worship is a key setting for interpretation for these persons are individually and corporately “sensitized to the aim of God (1977, 50).” In the sacrament of Holy Communion, memory and hope are united and experienced. Moreover, preaching points to how the heritage and a living God call forth faithfulness in the present.

With the pages of Religious Education Miller was again generous and kind. He encouraged different theological voices to express meanings of truth and vocation and demonstrate interpretation. Both of the theological perspectives defined above were present. On the one hand, theologies reflecting on human experience are seen in the attention paid to emerging theologies in Asia and Latin America as well as black and feminist theologies in the United States (Bonino, McConnell, Ruether). On the other hand, theologians who sought to teach the commitments of a particular tradition were also present (Heineken, Schreibmayr). In each case, Miller encouraged a description of how theology reflected on human living, God’s graciousness, and our responsibility. Theology was to inspire Christian growth, that is, “increase integration centered on the living God in our midst (1953, 413, see also 1962, 202).”

Theology was not simply the content of Christian education, rather it was a process of instruction and discernment by which persons were educated in their identity, interpreted the realities of their lives, and were sent into the world. Theology was never separated from the realities of the human community and the world we share. Contemporary examples of this perspective are found in both Charles Melchert’s articulation of understanding as the primary task of Christian education (1981) and Thomas Groome’s focus on the dynamics of religious knowing (1997). Both attend to how Christian wisdom is embodied as a living reality.

Into the Future

As we Christian religious educators seek to reflect on the heritage of the last 100 years communicated in the pages of Religious Education, how do we decide what to take into the next 100 years? “Indeed, what *is* Christian education?” I believe that theology is the clue – a theology that is in partnership with education considering the power and insights of educational research, human development, and social analysis. Let’s explore the three theological questions that have taken center stage: purpose, ecclesiology, and method.

In 1984 Allen Moore called on Christian religious educators to recover their “theological nerve.” He described the vocation of the Christian educator: “Rather than trying to be a part-time theologian and part-time social scientist, I believe I need to concentrate on becoming a full-time theologian who understands the context for educational reflection as the church’s presence in the world (26-27).” He further defined the task of being a “full-time” theologian:

1. to recover historical metaphors and paradigms of guidance and formation that can be reimaged in some helpful way today. . . [and]
2. reflecting on education theologically in the context of a global society and all the human, political, and social realities that involves (28).

As any good theology, a practical theology of education is concerned with “the common task of clarifying and interpreting faith and praxis . . . [to the end that] the richness of Jewish and Christian tradition can be realized again in the church’s life in an ever changing world (28).” Joining with Allen Moore, I also utter this call to recover our theological nerve as we move into the second hundred years of REA.

Concretely this means focusing on both forming Christian identity and responding in grace to “repair” the world. Drawing on the contributions of postliberal theology to define the praxis of Christian religious education: the primary task of Christian education in a world filled with increasing diversity and a cacophony of voices is to clarify and empower Christian formation (Higgins, Anderson, Brelsford, Osmer). Accepting George Lindbeck’s helpful analysis of a “cultural linguistic” view of religion, the task for Christian religious education is expressing and clarifying the nature and identity of the Christian perspective (or language) on reality (as summarized in the doctrines shared by the Christian community of faith) and to seek to understand how that unique community does form and instruct an identity through practices of Christian faith (See a description of formative practices in Anderson, 187-88). One is not really Christian unless one expresses what it means to know and follow God as incarnated in Jesus who we call the Christ (See Brelsford for a way of expressing this truth).

Christians face into the world as a response to their call from God. The “tradition” teaches us faithfulness. As Mary Boys articulates, we “put on Christ” and our community sustains “one another in the holy work of repairing the world (355).” As a “cultural linguistic” reality, both the doctrines that define and point us to God’s transforming and loving grace and the practices by which we are reminded of our cultural heritage are found within the church, the community of faith. How we empower the community to be a place that teaches the meanings of the faith and embodies its sustaining practices is a central task for the practical theologian of education. Or as Boys says, “to be a disciple means to practice the sorts of dispositions, actions, character, and way of Jesus (355).”

In addition, critical reflection on the faithfulness of the church as both a thinking and an acting community is an essential task. Teaching identity and vocation occur in the crucible of a community called church that sustains persons and calls them into unique relationships with the world. The practical theologian of education works at interpreting whether and how the church is enacting the community of faith.

Living a faithful identity is crucial to the embodying of the Christian faith into a world characterized by division, brokenness, and conflict. Elsewhere I have described the importance of this task as one of a theology of identity (2003). Higgins describes how two postliberal theologians express this task of faithfulness. For example, William

Placher calls the church faithful when it “simply” describes its own “world-view as forcefully as possible (83)” and “creates exemplary enclaves of speech and action (84).” Or for Stanley Hauerwas, “the task of Christians is to be the sort of people and community that can become a real option and provide a real confrontation for others (85).”

While agreeing with this fundamental educational task of identity formation, a limitation of the postliberal perspective is that it tends to exacerbate the diversity. While insisting on clarification (a needed and helpful clarification) of the meanings, identity, and practices of the Christian community, the effect of this pull toward an identity is also to accept the multiplicity of identities in the public world. See, for example, the analysis of Richard Osmer of how this multiplication can result in both an institutional rigidity within a particular community of faith as well as a radical cultural pluralism in the public square. “If the underlying narratives that make moral and theological discourse possible are really incommensurable, then there seems to be no ground for common discussion, much less moral agreement (Osmer, 66).” In other words, the result of an emphasis on Christian identity with a clear definition of doctrine and faithful practices might create a form of sectarianism where groups emphasize and demand adherences to faithful purity, yet have no way of really interacting with each other.

Of course the diversities are present and represent many realities, yet the question is how do we communicate and work together with others whose worldviews are so contrasting? Are differing traditions to ignore each other in segregated bastions or are they to increasingly conflict over the values enacted through law in a public world? Can we stand together in a common space with respect and partnership, rather than conflict and dismissal? Here is one of the greatest contributions of the Religious Education Association, providing a meeting ground for religious differences to simultaneously work together to address the realities of education in the wider public world we inhabit. Clearly, the impetus of REA was rooted in a liberal cultural vision expecting to discover the common religious experiences in nature, culture, environment, and living that the great religious traditions share. Unifying experience was what the founders of the REA expected. Yet, contemporary postmodern philosophy and theology have made it clear that experience is, in most instances, a result of the language, expectations, and practices people are taught within a community. Or as the philosopher and critic Stanley Fish observes, “unless the way of life is yours, you have no understanding of it (19-20).” We bring our traditions and our presuppositions to any situation.

Yet, is the only option we have contending and winning. The repair of God’s created world would imply a partnership that both recognizes differences and also works toward coalitions of care. As Allen Moore has clarified, “Religious education [*and religious communities, my addition*] can no longer go about its business as usual when faced with the cries of injustice and oppression (26).” Moreover, neither education nor theology are panaceas. “We need to be critical not only of what we do, but also what we bring to the doing (27).” The foundational hegemony once held in the middle ages as theology served as the queen of the sciences or the hegemony of the “liberal worldview” true of

much of the last century are neither faithful today. Yet, neither is a reification of separate identities faithful.

How do we both honor teaching an identity and working across boundaries in a diverse world to repair that world. I believe we need to complement a theology of identity with a theology of coalition (a public theology true to one's identity and true to the awareness that we seek a God who is living and creating). This theology of coalition is not a simple restatement of the liberal vision of REA; rather it is an effort to embody a *shared* postmodern and postliberal community.

A suggestion for the partnership of a theology of identity and a theology of coalition is reflected in Virgilio Elizondo's essay "A Bicultural Approach to Religious Education" in Religious Education. For Elizondo, "the world has become a crowded village. . . . New models of living and perceiving the world are necessary for humanity to survive (258)." Central to Christianity is the concept of the incarnation, that God indeed enters into our human struggles and into our human communities. Also Christians recognize human sin: we "isolate ourselves, building cities surrounded by walls, to divide and conquer for personal self-gain at the destruction of others (258)." Christian religious educators must therefore be located both "(1) within the tradition of their own people and (2) in the midst of chaos, slavery, death, and division (259)."

Elizondo offers a way for us to hold together in partnership (sometimes a very difficult partnership) a theology of identity and coalition by a bicultural approach to Christian religious education. Using the reality of living for Mexican Americans who share the identities of Mexican people (a *mestizaje* of native peoples and European conquerors) and of America (where ethnicity has become a differentiating reality). This "stew pot" means that people learn multiple identities. Religious faith connects with these sets of identities. Just as we understand the Christian gospel because of the heroic efforts of faithful persons to communicate the incarnated good news, the Mexican-American peoples have a unique way of expressing an incarnated reality of the gospel, yet that faith is expressed in a strange public world in hope of offering new possibilities and partnerships. The result of the public conversation is a new way of seeing challenging both cultural idols and offering expression of the good news (269)."

Theology as the Clue

We, Christian religious educators, need to reclaim our theological nerve, because a gracious God is calling us to offer an identity and faithful practices in the midst of the incarnated realities of human living. We simultaneously are called to work at a theology of identity and a theology of coalition. Arriving at the simple answer to the question "Indeed, what *is* Christian education?" was formed only with the expending of much effort, of anger, and of hurt. Today arriving at the simple answer of the partnership of a theology of identity and a theology of coalition will not be easy. However, Elizondo poetically and prophetically offers hope: "chaos, slavery, death, and division are where we celebrate and experience the presence of God, incarnate and one with us, journeying to the heavenly Jerusalem (270)."

The last fifty years have seen theology emerge as a clue to Christian religious education. May we claim the tasks of theology seeking to assist in the formation of Christian identity at the same time we seek to assist to build coalitions following God into repairing the creation. Miller's generosity provided an opportunity for Christian religious education to answer the question "Indeed, what *is* Christian education?" May our faithfulness and our generosity assist us in learning to be bicultural (or even multicultural) honoring our incarnated identities and working to build coalitions of healing and community. Such is the task and vocation of Christian religious education.

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