

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION Volume XLV, July-August, 1950, Number 4 (193-202).

### Growing Edges of Religious Education At Mid-Century

#### REPORTS

*In order that the thoughts and the fellowship of the 1950 Biennial Convention of the Religious Education Association may be shared more widely three papers and the reports of four discussion groups are presented in this issue.*

*The first paper needs a special introduction. This is an address which Harrison S. Elliott gave at a banquet which two hundred and fifty of his friends attend in his honor at Christ Church, New York City, on May 1, 1950. This occasion had a two-fold significance; it was a testimonial to his twenty-eight years of service at Union Theological Seminary, where he was a Professor of Religions Education and Psychology; and it was also in honor of his inauguration into the General Secretary-ship of the Religious Education Association. This address was a high point in the Biennial Convention.*

--The Editorial Committee.

#### I

#### REFLECTIONS OF A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR

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I must confess to a considerable degree of embarrassment over a gathering in my honor; but that embarrassment is somewhat relieved because I realize that I am tonight but an available symbol of our untied conviction as to the contributions which can be made through educational programs and processes. It is probably worthwhile for those who have been engaged in this enterprise in connection with various agencies representing both general and religious education to have an occasion for coming together in order to recognized that we are all a part of a single movement and in order to have a sense of solidarity in a common cause. We have worked together in various enterprises over the years in general and in religious education, within our own particular denominations and across denominational divisions, in churches and in allied agencies like the Christian Associations, within our own faiths and on an interfaith basis. Some of us who are here tonight have gone through difficult times together. We have also participated in some victorious occasions. Working together cooperatively on these enterprises has developed a fellowship of which we all feel ourselves a part. Participating as we have in these various projects, there have developed not only mutual respect and confidence but genuine regard for each other. The friendships which develop out of this kind of cooperative and participating work are those we prize. We are also keenly aware that we are tonight representatives of wider fellowship which stretches across the nation and around the world.

This evening would not have been possible but for the influence of great teachers whom I had the good fortune to have a crucial times in my own development. I wish the privilege of paying tribute to them tonight. Among these, Dr. George Albert Coe, still alert in mind at eighty-eight, is the Dean of us all in Religious Education. Some of you, who like myself had the privilege of having him as a teacher and of arguing our with him the problems in religious education, are deeply grateful for the stimulus to courageous and incisive thinking in his classes.<sup>1</sup>

In making preparation for this evening, I have reviewed the experiences in which we have shared to try to formulate what it is that binds us together in this fellowship. It is true that we represent a common conviction as to the importance of both education and religion and the need for a basic inter-relation between the two. But this inter-relationship of religion and education of itself does not build a fellowship. Certainly we are not bound together because we all think and believe alike. There are few, if any questions, on which all of us in this room would agree, and the wider fellowship, of which we are representatives, would be even more diverse in points of view. What has characterized our relationships has been respect for the convictions of others. But this has been more than superficial tolerance. We have believed that our own experience would be enriched and the common cause furthered by the contribution of these diverse viewpoints. There are significant movements today, particularly within Protestantism, where the effort is to unite around commonly accepted beliefs. Some of us in the wider movement of religious education are a part of these developments. But when we come together as religious educators, the significance of our fellowship grows out of the fact that distinctiveness and difference in convictions are magnified rather than minimized.

But diversity just as diversity does not make a fellowship. There must be unity in the diversity. The two words by which we are designated give the key to what has and does bind us together – religious education. On the face of it, these two words seem to represent our diversity rather than our unity. We have never had agreement as to what is meant by education and certainly we represent diverse interpretations of religious. But nevertheless these two words in combination do represent our unity.

## I

Let us look at education first and see what the new emphasis upon education in religion at the beginning of this century meant and what this emphasis means today. It was and is recognition of human responsibility and possibility in the field of religion. It was more. It was and is recognition of the pertinence of human knowledge, secured through reverent research and experimentation, to the field of religion. It was even more. It was and is a recognition that in the development of character, in the realization of religious experience, in the transformation of individual and group conduct, there are conditions which must be met and processes which must be followed, its results are to be expected. A distinctively experimental attitude characterized these developments. Not only must conditions be met and processes followed, but these must be discovered. For example, Lincoln School in general education and Union School of Religion in religious education were experimental institutions in which efforts were made to work our improved curricula and to develop a more effective methodology. The New Lincoln School, represented in this gathering tonight, is the latest adventure in this emphasis upon experimentation in education.

The three-fold assumption of human responsibility, of the pertinence of human knowledge, and of the reliability of life processes has been increasingly recognized in our common life in other areas than religion. If a farmer, an engineer, a physician, or a social scientist wishes successful results in his particular area, he recognized that there are conditions which must be met and processes which must be trusted. But at the opening of the century in the area of religion, the assumption was widespread, and it is still found today, that good intention and sincere purpose are all that are necessary. Those who were interested in religious education because convinced that this is a universe and that God works in and through the same orderly processes in the area of religion that He does in other aspects of that universe.

It is worth trying to recapture what the realization of all this meant to those who entered religious work in that period. Two main influences were found: Historical criticism in the use of the Bible and attention to improvement in educational method in the work of the churches and allied agencies. When I taught a Sunday school class fifty years ago, we were passing verses around and speculating as to what they meant. What the human knowledge of the origin and setting of the Biblical records has meant to the significant use of these records, no one can really feel who did not try to teach in the period before that rich resources out of a critical and historical approach were available. As to methodology I met up with the Herbartian method first in 1900-1901 in a Normal School in Northern Indiana and I still feel the glow of enthusiasm engendered as the possibilities of an improved methodology were presented. In my first professional position I was responsible for trying to be of help in connection with voluntary Bible Study groups under the Student Y.M.C.A. Students would enroll in these groups with great anticipation, hundreds of them in some of the universities, but before the end of the year, many of them had frittered away. There was strong promotion and sincere purpose, but the groups often failed. Even though I was a theological graduate, I had secured no help from my seminary training to meet that situation for I had my theological seminary course before Chairs or Departments of Religious Education had been established in those institutions. Accordingly, I asked for the opportunity for further training and went to Teachers College, Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary, bristling with questions. And I found answers to many of them.

The belief that there are conditions for effectiveness, which can be discovered, and processes which can be trusted meant for us in those earliest days the difference between blind and intelligent effort. For example, I got a cue as to what was the matter with those Bible Study groups. We had tried the widely-acclaimed Herbartian method, but it did not solve the problem. From a book on *How We Think* by John Dewey, published in 1910, and from other study I came to understand more thoroughly the exploratory thought processes available so mankind in finding the answers to his questions. That there are thought processes which can be trusted, if sincerely and thoroughly utilized, gave us confidence in our endeavors.

We believed in democracy in those days. We wished to further democratic participation, but so

often it was futile and irresponsible. Accordingly individuals from various agencies and three Faiths associated themselves together in what was known as The Inquiry to try to understand the conditions and to develop the processes for reliable democratic participation. Agencies like the Y.M.C.A. had pioneered in an emphasis upon the significance of groups and of group experience in religious education. But significant group experience did not just happen and there were many problems in connection with the formation and conduct of groups. With the cooperation of Professor Kilpatrick those of us who were related to the Boys Work of the Y.M.C.A. worked earnestly on the problems of effective group work. With the formation of the Social Group Work section of the National Conference of Social Work, there was a medium for a wider cooperative attached on this problem.

Through the influence of Freud and other European psychologists, it was gradually recognized that in the area of personal life and personality difficulties human knowledge is pertinent and redemptive processes are possible. How strange this emphasis was in general as well as in religious education is evidenced by the fact that there was only one course in this field in all of Columbia University, a course entitled Mental Adjustments taught by the late Professor Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Taking that course opened up a new field of possibility in the application of human knowledge and in the utilization of reliable processes. The course in this area which we established at Union in 1924-25, I think was the first in a theological seminary, and it was literally an experimental project in which the instructor brought in outside persons in this field and learned as he attempted to conduct the course. Now competency in counseling is part of the requisite equipment of the religious educator and preparation in this field is available in various theological institutions and universities.

If I have succeeded in making clear what I have tried to say I think you will agree that the confidence in *education*, which binds us together, has been no superficial trust in methodological tricks and devices. It has been rather the belief that in the area of human life and experience there are creative and redemptive processes available which can be discovered, which can be utilized, and which can be trusted.

## II

The second word in our name, *religious*, has been equally important in binding us together as a fellowship. Despite the criticisms which have been made of us that we were long on methodology and short on the theology, we have had definite religious beliefs. While many of us have shared in the beliefs of the particular branches of religion to which we belong, there have been distinctive beliefs which have bound us together in this fellowship. There has been a definite metaphysical grounding for our work. Those who have trusted a religious educational process have done so because they believe that man is so made and the nature of reality is such that it is through such a process that man finds his way in life. Some have interpreted this in definitely theistic terms and have believed that it is in and through such processes that God's will for human life become known and realized; others have thought in more naturalistic categories in terms of the good life or of spiritual values. But they have been in agreement that it is through an educational process that these values are defined and appropriated.

Religious education has also had its orientation to basic religious goals or purpose which gave directions to the process. There have been differences between us as to whether these basic purposes, be they Christian or Jewish, are given in the particular tradition and the process is to be so conducted as to lead to these given goals, or whether the particular religious heritage is to be utilized in determining the goals and the definitions of the goals is to be a part of the process; but never disagreement as to the basic character of these goals. There has been agreement that these values are not created by man but are potentially present, in the structure of the universe, and that the goals of the educational process as worked out should be in line with these ultimate values; however, they are interpreted.

Since we are united around religious education it is not surprising that philosophical and theological issues should have been prominent in the movement. When I went to Union Seminary twenty-eight years ago I rather assumed that I could pass the issues in the Philosophy of Education to Professor Kilpatrick and the theological issues to Professor Williams Adams Brown and Professor Eugene Lyman. But I have found myself in the center of philosophical and theological discussions during my entire teaching career.

This illustrates that which has been basic in the religious education movement and I think does unite us; viz, that human knowledge and human processes have to be taken into account in developing one's basic religious beliefs. If this is God's universe, whatever through reverent research or experimentation is

discovered about the nature of this universe and about human beings and human relations is part of the revelation of God. The religious educator's beliefs about man have been influenced both by the insights of his religious heritage and by the findings of psychology. His beliefs about the redemptive element in human life have also been influenced both by his religious heritage and by that which has become known through mental hygiene.

It is both a thrilling and a baffling experience to be a religious educator. It is thrilling because there is no field of knowledge which is irrelevant to his task and because the insights and the skills of those engaged in other fields are pertinent to his work and resources for him. It is baffling because it seems impossible for one person to keep abreast of the pertinent knowledge from so many fields; and to master so wide a range of skills. The religious educator is always in danger of being a jack of all trades and a master of none. There is no easy way out of his dilemma.

### III

Up until now, I have been attempting to describe the genius of the movement known as religious education. Now I should like briefly to review its history. There have been since I have been related to this movement two main periods. We are either already embarked upon or at the eve of a third period. The first period, commencing with the turn of the century and continuing until the early 1930's, was characterized by contagious optimism and kindling enthusiasm, particularly in the first half of this period. Religious education was on the march. It was hailed as the new Messiah. Directors of religious education were added to churches. Departments or Chairs of Religious Education were added in colleges, schools of education, and theological institutions. The International Council of Religious Education was formed.

It was a notable period, also for Judaism. It opened during the time of the highest immigration of Jews in to the United States when the Jewish population grew rapidly from less than 250,000. Leaders in Judaism set themselves to the Herculean task of developing a system of Jewish education which would be rooted in Jewish community and home life and which would conserve the cultural-religious values of Judaism but at the same time foster the harmonious integration of the Jew into the social pattern and cultural life of American.<sup>1</sup> For the Roman Catholics, this period was characterized by a great expansion in parochial schools, which increased in number from 3,482 in 1892 with 44 percent of Roman Catholic churches having schools to 7,923 schools in 1930 with around 60 percent of the churches with schools and an enrollment of 2,222,598 pupils.<sup>2</sup>

The interest in this first period was not confined to those who were specializing in the field of religious education. The best evidence of this fact was the organization and development of the Religious Education Association. The facts are succinctly set forth in the brief history of the Religious Education Association by Professor Orville I. Davis.<sup>3</sup> Religious Education was to mean much more than "Sunday School reform." It was to involve the entire educational program of the Church and to stimulate a vast program under the director of many other agencies. Among the 417 signers of the "call" for the organization convention were 45 college presidents and deans of colleges and theological seminaries, 48 professors, 65 ministers, and 66 from Sunday schools, YMCA's and other organizations. Five hundred and twenty-four ministers were among the 1259 charter members from 42 states and 5 Canadian provinces. The National Education Association indicated its approval and cooperation. The sixteen departments of the Association covered various aspects of religious education and different agencies. Three thousand from 23 states, 2 provinces of Canada, and 4 foreign countries attended the first Convention. Unless one participated in the events of this time, it is difficult to realize the sense of mission and the feeling of confidence which characterized this period in religious education.

The second period opened with the worldwide depression which confirmed the disillusionment which had followed World War I. This period, in contrast with the first, was characterized by pessimism about people and disbelief in the possibilities of human effort. It was characterized by efforts to get back to essentials in education, by a new orthodoxy in religion, and by a trend toward totalitarianism in

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Chipkin, *Twenty-Five Years of Jewish Education in the United States*, Jewish Education Association of New York City, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Burns and Bernard J. Kohlbrenner, *A History of Catholic Education in the United States*, Benziger Brothers, New York, 1937, p. 144-45.

<sup>3</sup> *Religious Education*, Vol. XLIV, January-February, 1949, pp. 41-54.

government. A basic distrust in democratic processes and democratic institutions developed and propaganda by which people's minds were made up for them became more the vogue. There seems to have been more of a reaction against religious education in Protestantism than in Judaism or Roman Catholicism. But certainly there were decided efforts in Protestantism. The optimism of the earlier period was characterized as sentimental illusion. Not only was the nerve of consecrated human effort cut but this effort itself was often characterized as sinful presumption. Many of the leaders of the social gospel, of liberal theology, and of progressive religious education moved to the opposite extreme in their beliefs and practices. The word liberal became a term of disapproval. The financial difficulties gave to the churches an excuse for discontinuing specialized help in the field of religious education; but more than this, the climate of the time gave those who had been opposed to religious education during the earlier period the courage to declare it a superficial fad which was now an end or a menace which should be abolished. At the 1935 convention in Rochester, NY, those affiliated with the Religious Education Association considered the possibility of giving the organization an honorable or dishonorable, burial but there was still an aggressive remnant which would not allow it to be destroyed, and the members of that remnant banded themselves together to ride out the storm.

The reaction in the second period led religious educators to re-examine the work they were doing and to modify a too easy optimism which had often characterized them. Events also sobered them as to the seriousness of their task. But in spite of the reaction against religious education, the situation was not completely one of despair. Many large churches held steady and maintained their specialized leadership. Denominational boards and the International Council of Religious Education continued their work. The American Association for Jewish Education, which in Judaism somewhat parallels the function of the International Council of Religious Education in Protestantism, was formed in this second period under Dr. Israel Chipkin's leadership. More than this, Jewish educators found it increasingly possible, despite ideological differences, to work together democratically in the development of educational standards. Community agencies, usually known as Bureaus of Jewish Education, were formed in forty communities. These included all groups and viewpoints in Jewish education and expressed the feeling of responsibility on the part of the Jewish community to provide for the education of all Jewish children without attempt on the part of these cooperative agencies to impose any one Jewish viewpoint or interpretation on individual schools. Father Thomas J. Quigley, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Pittsburgh, and a Vice-President of the R.E.A., has characterized this second period as the time when Catholic education began to emerge from its period of adolescence and at last to come of age. He adds that within the last twenty years the emphasis has completely shifted away from the feverish attempt to establish schools to a more scientific analysis and approach to the problems of school management and supervision.<sup>4</sup>

The net result of the developments of the second period has been to cause a serious division among those concerned about education and religion. In the first period, a process was going on which seemed to bid fair to unite the socializing and progressive forces of religion, education, and social work. The establishment of a new orthodoxy in religion, with its special doctrines of revelation and with its suspicion of human effort, was in direct conflict with the continued emphasis upon human effort and upon the social origin of ideologies in the general educational and social work groups. Efforts toward any dynamic synthesis or integration ceased. As a result, there have developed rival ideologies and because of these rivalries, there tends to be a dogmatism about all groups. Those in religious education find themselves in a difficult position for they cannot join either of the rival camps because they share the concerns of both groups. Further in their own life and work, they have been basically influenced both by their religious heritage and by the insights which have come out of so-called secular knowledge and they cannot in justice repudiate either.

#### IV

On the face of the situation it does not seem that we are at the beginning of a third period and that the time is propitious for a forward movement in religious education. It looks as if any such movement would be crushed between these rival ideologies which grip our world, that it is bound to be labeled as secular and naturalistic by the religious groups, and otherworldly and unrealistic by the educational, social work leaders. But may it not be that the religious education movement, rooted as it is both in religion and

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<sup>4</sup> *Religious Education*, Vol XXXIX, September-October 1944, pp. 273-281.

education, has come to the Kingdom for such as time as this. International problems cannot be solved by the division of the world into two rival groupings. Not can the problems of religious education be solved if we are divided into rival camps which must fight each other. Further, this is not necessary. Whatever may or may not be possible in relation to the international cold war, there is enough in common concern and purpose to make the transcending of these differences possible within religious education.

The first step, which is necessary, is respect for an understanding of the persons who with conviction differ from us. That respect and understanding will never come until chasms between these groupings are bridged and those with conflicting convictions come into communication with each other. But they must come together under conditions where they are not compelled for the sake of a pseudo-harmony to set aside their convictions. The efforts to resolve these conflicts by trying to formulate a theology for religious education have not solved the problem. They have tended to cover over the real issues. On the other hand, dogmatic promulgation of rival ideologies only accentuates the differences. I believe the temper of those involved in these differences, both within Faith groupings and between them and general educators, has changed sufficiently so it would be possible to explore them frankly. This would not result in a syncretic philosophy or theology for religious education. But such a process would reveal how much those seemingly in complete opposition have in common, and would enable us to explore our differences in a spirit of mutual confidence and respect.

A hopeful sign in the present situation is the growing recognition that religious education was thrown out in too cavalier a fashion and perhaps it has a contribution to make in these difficult times. Whatever the theology of the particular church, it still is an institution which has to be managed and it must have a program. However, much in theory some of the churches may have thought themselves in opposition, when facing the practical problems they turn to those who have insight and skill in the area of religious education for help in knowing how to meet the conditions for an effective program. An evidence of this is the number of churches which are now clamoring for individuals with educational training. In my judgment, the main hindrance to our influence in the days ahead will not be ideological, but will be the limitations in our own skill and insight and resourcefulness. Despite the progress which has been made during this past half century in general and religious education, with their allied fields of group work and counseling, we still are farther ahead in theory than in practice; we know more about what ought to be done than we know how to do it. We can get help on the problems of religious education by experimentation in general education. But we must not depend solely upon the developments in general education. We desperately need some way of rallying those with training and resourcefulness in experimentation which will point the way for the improvement of the program of religious education.

While we are further along in theory than we are in practice, there are still basic conflicts in the area of theory which need to be explored in the spirit of the religious education movement and by the processes in which it believes. One of the most crucial problems of our day is that of religion in general education. At present there are basic differences of conviction as to the solution of this problem. Those with these various convictions are pressing for the adoption of their own points of view. In the interests both of religion and education, not to speak of the children and youth who are involved, we must find a way of attacking this basic problem cooperatively.

The curriculum problem in religious education is by no means solved. There have appeared within the last few years carefully worked out curricula, in the development of which there has been invested not only skilled and consecrated devotion but large amounts of money. While each of these curricula is a contribution, it is doubtful whether any one contains the final answer to the curriculum problem, and certainly there are still basic unresolved conflicts in this area. On the college level also, there is a crying need for some agency which will give constructive attention to the curriculum of religion and indeed to the entire college curriculum.

In the use of the Bible, we have not adequately taken advantage of the results of a critical and historical approach or of the best educational theory and practice. Our time has been characterized by a renewed realization of the importance of the family in religious education, and there are many unsolved problems in this area. The seriousness of the economic, racial, political, and other social problems and the stake of religion in these areas has led to large attention to these questions in religious education. But there is not agreement as to the function of religious education nor as to how study should be related to action.

It must be evident that any freelance, front-line organization like the Religious Education

Association will not be lacking in problems it might explore. Many others could be listed. It may sound completely presumptuous to list all these possibilities in relation to an organization with the limited financial support and the small membership of the R.E.A. But here was a time when it was a strong organization, with a sizeable membership and numerous sub-groups working on problems of this sort. Perhaps the critical character of the situation and the importance of these problems will enable us, working together, to recapture some at least of its former strength. The need for it is as great as it was at the opening of the century. Even though our membership has not been large, during this period out of which we are passing the Religious Education Association has furnished a fellowship for those who still believed in religious education and a rallying center for those who were attempting to practice it. It has today as it had at the beginning, the function of keeping alive in our minds as well as in the public mind " the ideal of moral and religious education and the sense of its need and value."

<sup>1</sup>. Tribute paid by the speaker to his father, to Professor William H. Kilpatrick and others of his teachers, and to his wife, Dr. Grace Loucks Elliott, are omitted for lack of space.