

**Holding Onto Hope:  
Theological Controversy in Christian Religious Education**

Jack L. Seymour  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Their words for each other were too harsh. They held forth with passion and commitment, not listening. They seemed to be in a battle for the soul of Protestant church education. Yet, beneath the words, permeating both neo-orthodox and liberal educators, were fears that the vocations of educators and churches would be lost. Those fears are themselves keys to the enduring theological and missional issues at the heart of Christian education.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal religious educators, such as George Albert Coe, Sophia Fahs, William Clayton Bower, and Harrison Elliott, defined how the Protestant mainline churches discussed educational ministry. Yet, their trajectory was interrupted in the 1930s by the challenge of neo-orthodox theologians and educators, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, E.G. Homrighausen, James Smart, and H. Shelton Smith. They, in turn, feared that the theology and practices of liberal religious education failed to deal with evil – the hatred embodied in World War I and the terror of class conflict embedded in the world depression (Johnson, 82-86).

In the 1930s the theology of Karl Barth exploded on the American scene challenging, what was called, the compromises of the church with culture. Educator E.G. Homrighausen of Princeton Seminary, translator of Barth's work, became a premier interpreter of neo-orthodoxy. H. Shelton Smith exposed failures in liberal religious education. Biblical scholar James Smart guided neo-orthodox church education by creating the Presbyterian Faith and Life curriculum.

The conflict became vicious. Coe called it “an assault” upon liberalism (1939, 155). In turn, Gaines Dobbins, professor of religious education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, characterized liberals: “We see in the omissions, attitudes, contentions, and practices of those who pride themselves on being liberals, forces that will weaken if not ultimately destroy the educational program to which both liberals and conservatives are committed (1950, 83).” Whether they knew enough about each other to realize it, they both recognized the risks that enlightenment confidence had unleashed. Humans had been given the power to initiate a world-encompassing war and to create technologies that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Homrighausen, 1949, 354-55).

Without a doubt, Protestant liberalism had been too optimistic, too connected to emerging middle-class culture, and too individualistic. Nevertheless, liberals exhibited a deep faith and expended tremendous efforts to improve social conditions in the United States. They early engaged issues of race, war and peace, economic justice, anti-semitism, labor, and gender. They were concerned with the faithfulness of the church. Coe, for example, grieved that ecumenical councils shifted the theological discussion from the “life and work” of the church to its “faith and order.” He blamed neo-orthodoxy for confusing the church about its mission. Neither liberals

nor neo-orthodox really heard each other. Their convictions and rhetoric blinded both sides to thorough, mutual theological conversation about the order of the faith and its life and work.

Today we again experience a failure of listening among Christians. Denominations are in conflict. The rhetoric is heated. The language of heresy is used. The ability of church members to converse in the public is muted. Similar to the theological and educational battles of the 1930s and 1940s, on the one hand, a resurgent orthodoxy questions open, public religious education that honors pluralism (Neal, 32-24). Liberals, in turn, call their challengers “pre-modern reactionaries.” Regrettably tribalism has been a response to this controversy: differing traditions each claim truth for their option and, furthermore, claim that no other group can adequately understand their option. Consequently, efforts to understand different communities, to engage in mutual dialogue, and to build coalitions for the healing seem futile.

Again, the words are too harsh. An exchange of letters in The United Methodist Reporter is an example. Rhett Jackson wrote for the July 23, 2002 issue: “Sadly, I think the ultra-conservatives now outnumber those of us seeking a Christian religion of reason. . . . By controlling the General Conference they hope to control the theology and mission of The United Methodist Church. If this happens, thousands of us will have to form another denomination (Jackson).” Responses have been equally as confrontative: “So the liberal façade of tolerance for all points of view has finally been lifted. It is clear that Mr. Jackson’s fear-mongering column shows the lack of tolerance many of us on the evangelical side of the aisle have faced (Killenger).”

There are real differences. Yet, again, beneath the words, permeating the divergent sides, are great fears that essential convictions and important vocations for educators and the church are being lost. Another wrote, “I appreciate the fact that our church is faithful enough to be honest about the deep theological divisions in our midst.” Yet, “my fear and growing conviction is” that we will discover the church we seek “may not be the same church (Burch).”

Perhaps a review of the controversy among neo-orthodox and liberal religious educators will provide insight for the current debate. Understanding their commitments, their faith, and their visions of the world may provide a set of lenses to help us enjoin the necessary conversation about the meaning of the faith and its work. I now turn to those heroes of liberal and neo-orthodox versions of religious education. They witnessed to the power of God loosed in human community. They called religious education to fulfill its mission. They sought to practice the ministry of hope even in the midst of fascism and war.

### **Who Listened to Whom?**

Did they really hear each other and seek to converse about faith, order, life, and work? The answer is a resounding no! Both groups became camps and “turned a deaf ear” to each other.

H. Shelton Smith claimed that “the thought patterns of modern liberal religious nurture have largely exhausted their vitality, and that failure to reconstruct them in terms of a more

adequate faith will ultimately result in the collapse, or at least the slow death, of the twentieth-century movement of religious education (1941, vii).” He called liberal religious educators superficial: Rising “militantly to the defense of liberalism, they lump together all those who deviate from the pathway of liberalism and label them as Barthians. They regard the newer trends in theological thought as a return to authoritarianism (1939, 537).” Smith used the rhetoric of crisis: Since religious education was in a crisis, the church was in crisis. Liberals were blamed for propagating “illusions – individualistic, rationalistic, and optimistic (1933, 363).”

Reinhold Niebuhr further described the public failures of liberal education and theology: “America . . . is the most secular of modern nations. The characteristic credos of secular liberalism have permeated the culture to a larger degree and have influenced even religious communities. As a result American Christianity is characterized by quasi-secular viewpoints (1953, 371).” More directly, Homrighausen blamed this liberal “quasi-secularism” of denuding the faith of its power. Liberals, he argued, had capitulated to “high culture” and miserably failed to restrict the savagery of two world wars and address class conflict. “Profoundly affected by the bourgeoisie, the scientific, the intellectual, and the democratic man, such a Christianity easily succumbs to the spirit of the age. It may be taken captive by alien forces and cease to possess its indigenous character (1953, 420).”

Liberals returned the rhetoric, calling their challengers “backsliders.” Writing during World War II, Coe worried about the rise of authoritarianism exemplified in the fascism of the axis of Germany, Italy, and Japan. He identified this authoritarianism directly with reactionary tendencies in education and theology, that is, neo-orthodoxy. He continued: “For the struggle that became acute and widespread at the beginning of the twentieth century is going on still. . . . We encounter in daily experience cross currents, eddies, and ponds of back water (1944, 223-24).” Neo-orthodox challengers represented, to him, “ponds of back water.” Coe was not alone. Harrison Elliott blamed the problems facing the churches on “the fact that two separate and distinct streams of influence meet in the work of churches. The historic practices of the church belong primarily to the first stream and religious education primarily to the second. The efforts to adjust or integrate the two in the program of churches causes serious problems (1940, 5).”

Bower went even further claiming that neo-orthodoxy emphasized “the irrational elements in religious experience (1953, 296).” To him, a “theologizing” of education by grounding its norms “in the convictions, ideals, and cult actions of the historical Christian community” separated it from both research and concern for social change. Therefore, guarding the authority of the tradition and inducting persons into the Christian church overwhelmed the tasks of real education.

I could extend this description of exaggeration and criticism. Note the tone of the language. No longer are the issues discussed, but character is defamed. Realize that no one wanted to be called dying, bourgeois, quasi-secular, backwater, or authoritarian. Both groups were hurt by the characterizations. For example, Coe, in a eulogy, praised Elliott for his generosity to those who “had either been opposed or cold towards the Religious Education Movement, and as a result had weakened the movement.” Elliott, he said, treated his critics

“with a justice more profound than that which they treated themselves (1951b, 264).” In turn, responding to liberal criticisms, Homrighausen proclaimed, “I say teach, not indoctrinate (1949, 362)!” He was hurt that others would characterize the teaching of Christian doctrine as dogmatism. Rather, for Homrighausen, Christianity “centers in a Person; and is associated with a personal fellowship and Jesus Christ.” His words were poetic. “Christianity is song and symbol and biography and literature and community and ethos and color, and many other things. It is truth and love incarnate in Christ Jesus and His beloved community (1949, 362-63).” Regretfully, their passions inflated their rhetoric, and thus hopes and fears they shared in common went unaddressed.

Martin Marty, the contemporary church historian, speaks of a difference between conversation and argument. “Argument is based on the answer, conversation on the question. In argument, ‘I’ know the answer and must defeat, convert, or expel you, and vice versa. In conversation, ‘we’ know the question and must interact, respect, and learn from each other (2002, 7).” Furthermore, Marty argues that “individually and in communities, each of us can use the depth of our own commitment as warrants, as guarantees, that we understand the depth of the commitments of others (2002, 2, 7).” Instead of guaranteeing the depth of commitments represented in the other, both liberal religious educators and neo-orthodox church educators, undercut each other. How much more could have been gained by conversation?

### **About What Did They Argue? Differences that Divide**

The debate centered on theological issues and their implications for congregational education: the nature of the human, the meaning of salvation, and the understanding of God. A summary of this debate is found in a sarcastic response of William Clayton Bower to the 1947 report of the Committee on Theological and Educational Foundations of the International Council of Religious Education Committee. He said, the committee “reaffirmed the doctrine of original sin, man’s dual nature and a dual world, the externalism of salvation as a result of the intervention of supernatural grace, the givenness and absoluteness of truth as supernaturally revealed, and the idea that there is no salvation outside the church.” In contrast, Bower reminded committee members that “doctrines concerning God, man, sin, redemption, the person of Christ, and the church have undergone profound changes in the successive periods of church.” Instead of being a set of doctrines, theology was, for him, “the attempt of the Christian community to interpret Christian experience in terms of reflective thinking (1960, 244).” Theologies have changed. The Christian faith is thus vital in people’s lives only when “Christian faith, attitudes, and motives” have been expressed in “functional relation to the actual experience of growing persons with the real and present world (1960, 245).”

**The Nature of the Human:** Coe and Niebuhr debated publicly in the Christian Century. Niebuhr, the self-defined “realist,” noted that religious education had failed to address selfishness. “Society, in my opinion, merely cumulates the egoism of individuals and transmutes their individual altruism into collective egoism of the group.” Challenging Coe, he argued “there is no scientific proof that innate human intelligence has increased since the dawn of history (1933, 364).” In response, Coe was appalled at the limits Niebuhr put on human possibility. He asked: What good does a theology of depravity offer? “We have, indeed, no proof that society

will or will not attain any ethical goal that now is distant; we can only choose whether to aim high or to aim low (1933, 363).” Coe prayed for “ethical creativity.” He worried that Niebuhr’s low estimation of human possibility stifled creativity.

Both were deeply concerned about hope and change, yet their sources were different. Coe pointed to heroic personalities as examples of ethical creativity: “The qualities we have found in men of science, philosophers, theologians, inventors, artists and religious prophets appear also in the great strugglers for civil liberties, political rights, sex equality, and full recognition of personality regardless of color, national origin, religion, and political alignment (1951a, 173).” For Coe, such heroism was also present in ordinary working people who suffered for their convictions. Self-criticism and creativity offered persons the possibility of hope. The University of Chicago educator Ernest Chave contrasted liberal and neo-orthodox views: “Instead of trying to add religion as a set of strange beliefs and customs to over-crowded and confused lives, let growing persons become aware of the latent powers within themselves and in the processes in which they live, move and have their being (1950, 68).”

Yet, it was precisely to what liberals called “strange beliefs” that the neo-orthodox turned. Sin had not been banished. Sin was obvious and ubiquitous. Fearing romantic naiveté, which had allowed Coe to call the kingdom of God the “democracy of God” and thus hooked the fate of Christianity to social democracy, neo-orthodox educators pointed to the depth of human sin. Such sin can only be rooted out by a thorough regeneration, transcending the expectations of humans (Smith, 1939, 571-74).

**The Meaning of Salvation:** Clearly, while both liberals and neo-orthodox sought to respond to the destruction caused by world wars, they offered different versions of salvation. H. Shelton Smith feared the idea that humans could achieve regeneration through their own actions. In a “techno-industrial civilization,” he wrote, this is dangerous because it releases power without adequate restraint. Terms like “quest,” “creativity,” and “self-realization” have resulted, he believed, in the expansion of power. They were thus a “dangerous heresy” ignoring dependence on God’s new life offered in Christ (1939, 573-74).

Another neo-orthodox educator, Homrighausen, noted that civilization itself is in crisis. Liberal views of effort, creativity, freedom, and initiative, he believed, missed that “we live a much more profound existence.” Their ideas of “autonomous man” and of “material progress” had, in fact, “imperiled man’s existence.” Human efforts need an “evaluation” from beyond the human. Otherwise, the spiritual becomes a “cupola sanctioning a secular society.” He believed that serious critical evaluation only resulted from faith in God’s power both to judge and to offer new life. “It is my firm conviction that we are saved from the violence of a mass collectivism, as well as from a chaotic, bourgeois individualism, only by the Christian Gospel (1939, 14).” Or, as a seminar on theology in education stated it, “grace is man’s hope. Religious educators are not substitutes for, but rather channels of, the grace of God (1954, 172).”

This negative thinking appalled liberals. Writing the same time as Homrighausen, at the beginning of World War II, Coe described the educational program of Chancellor Hitler that had made a whole generation subservient to authority. He pleaded: Only open, democratic, and

critical thinking challenge authority (1942, 132). Not denying the brutality and destructiveness of humans, Bower too pleaded that revelation and authority did not provide answers. He admitted that freedom had too often become license and responsibility avoided. “In the face of brilliant technological achievement, we are confronted by a social situation of world proportions that for the moment is out of hand (1939, 165).” Most people, he believed, took one of two options: (1) defeatism “lapsing into cynical pessimism” or (2) “supernaturalism and apocalypticism.” In contrast, he held that brokenness was addressed only through reason. “We have not yet learned to live in a world of relative values rather than absolutes (1939, 165).” We must, he argued, seek to live in the midst of ambiguity, rather than giving in to authoritarianism.

**The Understanding of God:** Neo-orthodox educators and theologians understood God by looking to the revelation in Jesus Christ: “Can there be any Christian nurture without faith which is a continuous response to the divine initiative (Homrighausen, 1949, 362)?” The sinful predicament of humans can only be addressed by “the full salvation of man through an exposure of his being to the revelation of God’s purpose, claim, love and power to the end that he may be continually conformed to the image of the true man Christ Jesus (1949, 359).” Education thus engages the church in the creation of an environment that teaches and lives this gospel.

In contrast to this “over against” understanding of God and Jesus is the immanent view of progressives. Coe limited the authority of Jesus, and thus his revelation. “This going the whole length with respect, active love, and drive toward community is what makes Jesus irresistible. His thinking about nature, history, and God is not irresistible, and of course theologies that are based upon it are not. But his love, even for enemies, adds to the value of life what nothing seems to take away (1951a, 175).” God’s grace was present and known through the creative witness of persons. Liberals relied on the theologies of Henry Nelson Weiman, Borden Parker Bowne, and Alfred North Whitehead that connected God to the processes of creation (Bowman, Weiman, and Fallaw). Or, as Weiman’s colleague, Bower phrased it: “God is to be sought and found, not in the past that no longer exists except as it lives on in the present, nor in the future that does not yet exist, except as it is coming into being. . . . God confronts man in his interaction with his real and present world (1960, 247).”

**Understanding Theology:** Note the sarcasm even present in the formulation of these theological commitments. Persons were called naive, authoritarian, judgmental, propagators of strange beliefs, or secularists. These are not names that inspire conversation and common efforts.

In fact, two distinct understandings of theology are at work. For the liberals, an extreme example is reflected in Sophia Fahs, who had been removed from the “orthodox” Union Theological Seminary for failing to sign a required credal statement. Fahs had thus experienced neo-orthodoxy as silencing her alternate theological view. She was convinced that the turn to revelation and authority was an effort to control and silence.

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.” . . . As a result of this great expansion of religious knowledge, it would seem that certain traditionally held beliefs could no longer be intellectually respectable to informed persons: For example, the exclusive claim of one religion to be the “hope of the world,” or of one Bible to be the only book containing a Life-giving revelation, or the claim of one people to be the peculiar beneficiaries of a “covenant” with God (1960, 172).

Homrighausen, in turn, pleaded that liberals had misunderstood theology. Theology was not authoritarian. While he admitted past failures of theology, “its dogmatism, its intolerance, its reactionism, its divisiveness, its rationalism, or even its sentimentalism,” he practiced theology differently (1953, 421).

For liberals, theology was based in human experience. Frank McKibben of Garrett Biblical Institute, said “We openly and honestly admit to start with what we believe is the uniqueness of the Hebrew-Christian religion, the “rock-bottom” realism and truthfulness of its interpretation of the nature and meaning of life as it rose functionally in experience (1950, 99).” Note, in experience. For the neo-orthodox theologians, the primary source of theology was the community of witnesses, the Christian church and its heritage. Homrighausen wrote that the task of the Christian educator is to “work at the recovery of the meaning of theology, at the correction of Christianity’s distortions and heresies; he will also seek to clearly proclaim and communicate the significance and meaning of the various affirmations of the Christian position (1953, 418).” Note the differences: For McKibben, theology and Christian education emerge from experience; for Homrighausen, they are the clarification of the Christian story.

This distinction parallels today’s conversation. For example, George Lindbeck has described two forms of theology: (1) a “cultural-linguistic” form consisting of the story and life-ways of a people, and (2) an “experiential-expressive” form based on reflection on human experience (1984). One form seeks to clarify and communicate the meanings of a people and their community including unique and essential understandings. The second warrants itself in terms of public understandings. The neo-orthodox sought to reclaim and re-state the meanings of the historic Christian faith. The liberals sought to ground Christian theology and reflection amidst the emerging scientific and public conversations.

### **About What Did They Converse? Keys to Our Current Conversation**

Despite their rhetoric to the contrary, they shared much in common. While differences were real and cannot be diminished, their “family feud” limited the conversation about commitments they shared – commitments to healing creation and to finding grace and empowerment in the Christian story. Both the liberal and neo-orthodox communities feared a loss of theological integrity and a failure of Christian mission. Let’s turn to shared commitments – commitments they, in fact, overlooked – as clues to the present conflict renting the community of faith and its educational mission.

**The Limitations of Modernity:** Their common recognition of the limits of Enlightenment confidence is astonishing. Homrighausen analyzed how the trust placed in human creativity resulted in the failures of the world wars (1949, 353-355). Also, even with affirming reason, Coe articulated that the issue “for such a time as this” was both to recognize the limits of human effort and to encourage the human community, with the help of God, to embody faith and mission (1942, 131, 135-136).

Both liberal and neo-orthodox educators were deeply concerned about the state of the human community; neither was blindly optimistic in the midst of the ferocity of war and retribution (Homrighausen, 1939, 10-11; Bower, 1937, 117-118; Elliott, 1950, 201-202). What would have been possible if, in addition to clarifying theological differences, they also would have worked on common commitments growing out of the theological heritage they shared?

The same is true today. Fearing a seizing of control by those who are different, the name-calling continues: “heretic” or “fundamentalist.” Even calling another “modern,” “pre-modern,” “post-modern,” or “post-liberal” creates walls and simplifies instead of inviting conversation.

**Theology as Interpretation:** Both neo-orthodox and liberal educators sought to ground their reflections in the Christian faith. The symbols and commitments of the faith were important for both groups. In turn, the human sciences and cultural wisdom were also important. What differed again was the emphasis: One sought to connect more to contemporary science and criticism; the other, to the Christian tradition.

For example, Harrison Elliott, a year before his death, responded to an invitation to speak about the contribution of his work. As a good liberal, he highlighted human responsibility and “the pertinence of human knowledge (1950, 196).” Yet, he did not do so naively, nor arrogantly. Elliott expressed his commitment to God’s will. “If this is God’s universe, whatever through research or experimentation is discovered about the nature of this universe and about human beings is part of the revelation of God (1950, 198).” McKibben spoke similarly: “We believe that God has been and is definitively active in history in the lives of men and nations, that this God has employed various means of making himself and his will known to men (98).” Both human sciences and the heritage of the faith were sources. The same was true of the neo-orthodox. Niebuhr was clear that theology needed both social analysis and the Christian gospel (1939, 364). Homrighausen connected educational analysis and theology (1949, 363).

Both sides sought to communicate the faith with vitality. Bower feared persons would believe that the “resources and possibilities” of Christian faith had been “exhausted (1939, 170).” He worked to communicate its depth and new life as both an historical and contemporary movement (1953, 308). Homrighausen, similarly pointed to the “authentic truth and love” at the heart of Christian faith. Christianity needed a “systematic theology,” for “there is a framework in all its work, worship, fellowship, ministry, and education. . . . Doctrine is woven into the fabric of Christian culture (1949, 362-363).” He used the analogy of music to demonstrate how educational analysis and Christian theology connect: “There is a science of music: to those who listen to Bach in the company of Bach enthusiasts, there comes an understanding of the structure

and the beauty and the positive drive of Bach's faith (1949, 363)." Both highlighted the beauty and possibilities of Christian faith. Why did they miss this conversation?

Clearly a difference in emphasis is present, but it is an emphasis that emerged out of particular situations. One side was challenging a controlling, authoritarian faith. The other sought to challenge an entrenched, uncritical affirmation of human power. In today's situation, we are aware that scientific and technological culture is also a narrative – a secular one. The integrity of the church dies if it loses itself in this narrative and does not connect deeply with the narratives and practices of the faith. Nonetheless, the mission of the church must be proclaimed in this context of a scientific and technological culture. The common search for today, as was true of both liberals and neo-orthodox, is proclaiming both the integrity and the vitality of the faith known in Jesus Christ.

### **Hopes and Directions**

Are there hopes here for contemporary controversies about the faith? First, denying or minimizing theological and missional differences is not helpful. The differences of visions and commitments need recognized and expressed. Emily Burch, in her response to the conflict between liberal and conservative theology, may in fact be right. The church we discover might not "be the same church (2002)." Differing ecclesiologies are in fact different. Some perspectives are irreconcilable. Yet, the question remains: Can coalitions of integrity and mission be formed out of dialogue, rather than baiting and name-calling?

Without a doubt, the "debate" itself expanded the differences between liberal and neo-orthodox views. Debate focuses differences and makes contrasts. Instead of debate, Jesse Zeigler, professor at Bethany Biblical Seminary and eventually executive of the Association of Theological Schools, Christian educators must admit there is "reason for chagrin and disappointment (1950, 357)." They must recognize that the goals "are more important than anything else in the world (362)." Focusing on goals of becoming conscious of God, proclaiming Jesus Christ, taking on the mind of Christ, and embodying ideals in the social order are much more important than winning a debate.

A faith is learned, as any significant social narrative, by being immersed in the stories, practices, and community of a particular people. The result is a distinctive perspective – a set of lenses for seeing the world – much like what Homrighausen described as listening to the music of Bach with those immersed in his work (1949, 363). Power and depth are confronted. Religious groups must work at that narrative – clarifying, critiquing, and communicating. This is **a task** of theology and theological education (Seymour, 2001, 419-422).

Yet, in addition to this identity building, is there not also **another task** of theology – to clarify the options and coalitions that contribute to the good of the human community. Today, we seem to have reverted into a form of tribalism that mutes conversation, assuming that others are wrong and unable to understand. How are perspectives of differing communities shared, conversations engaged, and coalitions for healing built?

Bower pointed to efforts of the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America to share resources and to focus “attention upon common practical needs and problems (1953, 294).” Elliott used the Jewish community in the U.S. as an example of both engaging the distinctive educational tasks of identity and also of building coalitions for public good. They “set themselves to the herculean task of developing a system of Jewish education . . . rooted in Jewish community and home life” at the same time that they engaged the wider culture (1950, 199). Focusing on needs and problems may be the clue.

Two theological tasks are central. The first is to clarify, enliven, and embody the narratives and practices of the community of faith. In this regard, serious conversation will occur and disagreement about faith perspectives will be present. What is new? The history of Christian faith is filled with interpretations that have varied with communities and times. How are these differences addressed? By living the “charity” expected of members of the community of faith! “Sectarian division is prevented by the way a conflict is handled – a fellowship of mutual concern and admonition, based on the recognition that Christianity is just the sort of thing that prompts a controversy with no clear pointers on how to settle it (Tanner, 174).”

A second theological task focuses on the realities of living within a particular time and culture and developing coalitions to engage those realities. In his analysis of liberal religious education, Rabbi Israel S. Chipkin offered: “The indictment of divisiveness and backwardness which is made against existing historic religions can be removed by them not only by accepting the ‘new knowledge,’ but also by renewing and enforcing for their adherents, the knowledge of their respective religious teachings which were inspired by supreme spiritual experiences (1950, 79).” Chipkin suggested a theology that intentionally works **with integrity** to build coalitions of care across religious communities. Communication and community are built in efforts expended together. Without a doubt, such conversation across the known territory of one’s tradition with another is risky. The integrity of a faith position can be compromised. Both liberals and neo-orthodox feared being so tainted. Sadducees, the tainted ones of the New Testament, knew this well. Seeking life for the Hebrew faith community in the midst of Roman oppression resulted in accusations of faithlessness by Pharisees, apocalyptic Jews, and the emerging Christians.

Yet, despite the risk, both theological tasks are needed. Suggestions about how to honor both a theology of identity and a theology of coalition is described by Hanan Alexander in Reclaiming Goodness: Education and the Spiritual Quest as a way of forming a more **moral and tolerant** public community. Alexander embodies the perspective Lindbeck calls “cultural-linguistic” and builds on the philosophies of character offered by Alistair McIntire and Charles Taylor. He develops a form of conversation and commitment to the public that is both communitarian and reaches out to the other (2001). Tanner offers a similar option for Christians: “Are there other goods, besides consensus, that might be sought? . . . Through the ongoing practice of choosing dialogue over monologue, then emerges a strengthening of the commitment to search for the meaning of Christian discipleship together (175).”

A concrete example of this approach is provided by the National Jewish Scholars Project of the Institute of Christian and Jewish Studies. They begin by opening “the door to a serious

and sustained inquiry into the values and beliefs that distinguish Christians and Jews.” Such an effort seeks to honor the integrity of a religion and its practices while at the same time stimulating communication and common efforts of service. The “Dabru Emet” is a significant example. This Jewish statement on Christianity highlights the differences and connects the commitments:

Jews and Christians, each in their own way, recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, poverty, and human degradation and misery. Although justice and peace are finally God's, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long. Separately and together, we must work to bring justice and peace to our world.

That I might be highlighting these hopes for combining both theologies of identity and theologies of coalition when I am a relatively successful, comfortable, middle-class, white, male American might provide sufficient grounds for a charge of naiveté. That characterization is of course true. I am. The suggestion for both (1) a theology of identity that clarifies and builds up the faith community, its story and practices, and (2) a theology of public conversation may be impractical. Yet, it is needed. I know that differences are real. Disagreements will be revealed as well as coalitions of commitment. Some positions will even be untenable.

Yet, to focus on winning the debate simply means that the words spoken to each other will be too harsh. Differences will be held forth with passion and commitment, but without listening. We will continue the battle for the soul of faith and its education. And, beneath the war of words, permeating multiple sides, we will ignore the enduring theological and missional issues at the heart of discipleship as well as our commitment to an education that heals, nurtures, and engages God's love and hope in the midst of the world. We need to learn to talk, to listen, to be informed, to be questioned, to be enlivened, and to find real differences that risk division. But we engage it knowing that it is God that forgives, it is God that heals, and it is God that empowers.

## References

- Alexander, Hanan. 2001. Reclaiming Goodness: Education and the Spiritual Quest. South Bend: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.
- Bower, William C. 1939. Points of Tension between Progressive Religious Education and Current Theological Trends. Religious Education 34 (July-August): 164-172.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1953. Protestant Religious Education. Religious Education 48 (September-October): 291-309.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1960. Recent Trends in Christian Education: An Appraisal. Religious Education, 55 (July-August): 243-247.
- Bowman, Clarice. 1956. What Faith, What Nurture? Religious Education 51 (September-October): 379-388.
- Burch, Emily. 2002. A Pastor's Faith and the Resurrection. The United Methodist Reporter (August 16).
- Chave, Ernest J. 1950. Religious Education for Liberal Progressives. Religious Education 45 (March-April): 67-72.
- Chipkin, Israel S. "Evaluation: Religious Education for Liberal Progressives. Religious Education 45 (March-April): 78-80.
- Coe, George A. 1933. Two Communications: Coe vs. Niebuhr. Christian Century (March 15): 362-363.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1939. The Assault Upon Liberalism. Reprinted in Religious Education 47 (March-April, 1952): 155-162.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1942. "For Such a Time as This." Religious Education 37 (May-June): 131-137.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1944. The Religious Education Movement – A Retrospect. Religious Education 39 (July-August): 220-224.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1951a. My Search for What is Most Worthwhile. Reprinted in Religious Education 47 (March-April, 1952): 170-176.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1951b. Contributions of Harrison Elliott. Religious Education 46 (September-October): 264.
- Cully, Kendig B. 1959. Two Decades of Thinking Concerning Christian Nurture. Religious Education, 54 (November-December): 481-489.
- Dobbins, Gaines S. 1950. Evaluation: Religious Education for Liberal Progressives. Religious Education 45 (March-April): 82-84.
- Elliott, Harrison S. 1940. Can Religious Education Be Christian? New York: The Macmillan Co, 1940.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1950. Reflections of a Religious Educator. Religious Education 45 (July-August): 195-206.
- Fahs, Sophia L. 1960. The Theological Dilemma in Religious Education: Comment. Religious Education 55 (May-June): 171-173.
- Fallow, Wesner. 1953. Trends in Protestant Education. Religious Education 53 (January-February): 10-16.
- Homrighausen, E.G. 1939. The Real Problem of Religious Education. Religious Education 34 (January-March): 14-17
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1949. Christian Theology and Christian Education. Religious Education 44 (November-December): 353-363.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1953. Theology and Christian Education. Religious Education 48 (November-December): 415-421.
- Jackson, Rhett. 2002. The Church Braces for Theological Battle. The United Methodist Reporter (July 23).
- Johnson, F. Ernest. 1938. Religious Education and the Theological Trend. Religious Education 33 (April-June): 82-86.
- Killenger, John W. 2002. Letters to the Editor. The United Methodist Reporter (August 9).
- Lindbeck, George A. 1984. The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Marty, Martin E. 2002. Pluralism and Civility. Speaking of Values 26(Spring): 1-2, 7.
- McKibben, Frank. 1950. Evaluation: Religious Education for Liberal Progressives. Religious Education 45 (March-April): 97-99.
- Miller, Randolph C. 1954. Theology in Religious Education. Religious Education 49 (March-April): 168-172.
- National Jewish Scholars Project. The Institute of Christian and Jewish Studies. "Dabru Emet." [www.icjs.org](http://www.icjs.org).
- Neal, Patrick. 2002. Adam Smith or FDR? The Liberal Choice. Christian Century (July 31-August 13): 32-34.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1939. Two Communications: Coe vs. Niebuhr. Christian Century (March 15): 363-364.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1953. Religion and Education. Religious Education 48 (November-December): 371-373.
- Seymour, Jack. 2001. Knowing God: Revelation and Theological Education. Religious Education 96 (3): 417-422.
- Smith, H. Shelton. 1939. Theological Reconstruction in Religious Education. Christendom 4(Autumn): 565-574.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1941. Faith and Nurture. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Tanner, Kathryn. 1997. Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Weiman, Henry N. 1940. The Place of God in Education: A Criticism. Religious Education 35 (January-March): 28-31.
- Ziegler, Jesse H. 1950. Is Religious Education Fulfilling Its Function? Religious Education 45 (November-December): 356-362.