

Thomas E. Leuze  
Oakland City University  
Oakland City, Indiana

## HOW HAVE WE RECKONED WITH THE BARTHIANS? RESPONSE TO H. SHELTON SMITH

“How to make education religious and religion educational is the perennial problem of modern society,” H. Shelton Smith wrote upon his departure from the staff of the International Council of Religious Education (1929). Smith continued to address this concern from academic posts at Teachers College of Columbia University, Yale Divinity School, and the Graduate School of Religion at Duke University. Voicing his concerns in such *Religious Education* articles as “Let Religious Education Reckon With the Barthians” (1934) and “Is Religious Naturalism Enough?” (1936), Smith began to articulate a serious critique of the still popular progressive religious education movement. Smith’s critique found its most comprehensive expression with the publication of *Faith and Nurture* in 1941. Published in response to Harrison Elliott’s defense of liberal religious education *Can Religious Education Be Christian?* (1940), Smith’s work was a polemic against the commonly held position.

*Faith and Nurture* signals movement towards a turning point in the history of religious education. On the occasion of the centennial of the Religious Education Association, Smith’s position deserves another visit. This paper will summarize Smith’s critique of liberal religious education as represented by the Religious Education Association of the early 1940s and the position articulated by Harrison Elliott. Following the description of Smith’s position, an overview of response to that position and an attempt at clarification of the position Smith holds in the history of religious education.

### FAITH AND NURTURE SUMMARY

With the rapid rise of Neo-Orthodoxy in the United States, a significant question arose for the Religious Education community:

Shall Protestant nurture realign its theological foundations with the newer currents of Christian thought, or shall it resist those currents and merely affirm its faith in traditional liberalism? (Smith 1941, vii).

H. Shelton Smith maintained that there were weaknesses present in traditional religious liberalism which threatened the work of Christian nurture. Unless these areas were corrected, liberal religion would not regain the relevancy which, Smith believed, it had lost. Thus, Smith maintained that Religious Education must reform itself by addressing the weaknesses which Smith would outline in his critique.

Four areas of thought which were influential in the shaping of nineteenth century liberalism were divine immanence; an emphasis on growth; the goodness of humanity; and the historical Jesus. The introduction of Darwin's theory of evolution was rapidly

accepted by liberal religious thought and is recognized as a significant influence in each of these areas (Smith 1941, 5-26). George Albert Coe sought to reintroduce Horace Bushnell's concept of Christian nurture with the added influence of the theory of biological and cultural evolution. The movement sought to begin a "quest" which "will result in the creation of spiritual norms that transcend those embodied in the Bible" (29). The movement as it has been fashioned by these influences was the target of Smith's attack.

### The Kingdom of God

Smith argued that there is a tendency on the part of liberalism to reject the "other-worldly" idea of the Kingdom of God. It is a most common interpretation to view the Kingdom as being in this world and as being a social Kingdom. Since a democracy was perceived as being the most ideal social structure, George A. Coe in A Social Theory of Religious Education substituted the phrase "democracy of God" for the phrase "kingdom of God." Coupled with the idea of the social growth of humanity, the democracy of God abandoned its emphasis on God and became a distorted "anthropocentric kingdom." (39) Contemporary religious thought shaped the doctrine in three tendencies: "the principle of the value of persons," (41) "the identification of religion with the process of the discovery of ethical meaning and worth of persons," (44) and the idea of sovereignty (50).

The value of persons became an obsession with Religious Education to the point that the idea of relationship to God was abandoned. Smith asserted that the Christian faith maintains that "man is a theonomous being" (43). The meaning and value of individuals comes not from each individual but from God. In progressive religious education though, humanity was deified and the democracy of humanity was substituted for the Kingdom of God. This approach tended to award meaning to persons based on social interaction rather than drawing meaning from God.

The second tendency was to "identify religion with the process of the discovery of the ethical meaning and worth of persons" (44). This led to the idea in Religious Education that contact with God is found exclusively through social interaction. Thus, it denied that persons may experience God through the world of nature and that God is transcendent of humanity (47). Additionally, it demanded that insight must be gained from experience of others and then applied to experience of God rather than the possibility of the reverse order.

The third tendency was related to the idea of sovereignty. Smith wrote that "the value of persons is usually assumed to be the ultimate ground and dynamic of the democratic state" (50). This tended to obscure divine sovereignty and, as a result, humans were determined to be of more value than God. "In effect," Smith alleged, "it reverses the relation of God and man. The creature under the Kingdom thus becomes the master over the Kingdom" (54).

Smith assailed the liberal position for its assumption that the Kingdom of God

should be considered as an earthly society. It was erroneous to obscure the distinction between the Kingdom and any social order. The Church “must recognize that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke will always be a transcendent reality never to be fully translated into the relative forms of human culture” (57).

Smith argued that while the introduction of a “Kingdom of God” on earth might be desirable, it was naive to assume that it may be accomplished through the methodology employed by the liberal religious educator. The religious solution to our culture is not found in the spiritual elements of culture but in a transcendent experience of the Kingdom of God (64). The idea of society evolving towards the Kingdom was in need of further examination. Evidence suggests that society is dominated by discontinuity rather than continuity and the change is rapid rather than gradual (64-66). For Smith, the idea of a “democracy of God” seemed to be fatally flawed.

### The Doctrine of Man

Another area in which the liberal Church was in need of revision or reformation was in its understanding of humanity. Smith criticized the use of psychology, sociology, and anthropology for an appreciation of persons when they involve the exclusion of a realistic understanding from the Christian faith. Smith maintained

It is our claim that man, from the Christian point of view is a theonomous being. That is to say, he is a being who is created “in the image of God.” This signifies that man can be truly understood only from the divine perspective. Thus while the sciences of psychology and sociology are indispensable to our total knowledge of man, they do not, as sciences, afford us ultimate light on the origin, nature, and destiny of human existence. In this sphere, at least, Christian faith, implemented by theology has an indispensable word (69-70).

Christianity affirms that persons have their origin in the creative action of God. Thus, persons stand as responsible creatures in relation to Sovereign Creator. This is obscured and even denied by the liberal understanding of humanity. For Smith, the Christian understanding of human values was in conflict with secular understandings of human values.

Christian nurture maintains that human value is amplified when connected with a transcendent God. “Secular humanists” counter that human value is diminished by identification of their origin and significance with a transcendent Being (79). Christian nurture holds that only God is of supreme value. For humanism, the individual is of supreme value (81-82). The value of humans, from a Christian perspective, is based on relationship with God - thus it is not liable to fluctuate. From the humanist perspective, human value is measured in terms of social judgement and is apt to change as culture changes (83-84).

Two “truths that are fundamental to the doctrine of Christian nurture” are the correlative elements of divine providence, individuals in relationship with God, and

dependence and responsibility of the individual to God. (86-87). These “truths” are of significance in the consideration of the issue of sin. Smith maintained that the elimination of a doctrine of sin, such as the liberal religious education movement effected, presents some very real problems.

The elimination of sin creates an unrealistic interpretation of the nature of persons. It obscures and denies the “contradiction between man in his original creation and man in his present empirical existence” (94). While it is not desirable to overemphasize the sinfulness of persons as was evident in the revivalism of the nineteenth century, neither is it desirable to overemphasize the godlikeness of persons as is evident in liberal religious education. Persons need to be understood as both child of god and sinner.

A second problem area is in the liberal emphasis upon the source of sin as being the result of social forces. Thus, the individual responsibility for sin shifted to a collective responsibility with the resulting erroneous view that the eradication of particular social structures will result in the eradication of evil (96-97).

A third problem is in the interpretation of sin as being a problem of human relations primarily. Smith maintained that sin is not exclusively a social transaction. There is an ultimate reality involved in every act of human conduct and that reality is God. Sin is not only an action of one person against another person, it is an action against God (97-99).

### An Understanding of the Gospel

Historically, liberal Protestant nurture begins with Horace Bushnell in his response to the revivalistic evangelism of his day. The method which resulted from Bushnell's work involved a child-centered Church and the rejection of revivalistic evangelism except for the conversion of adults who were unreached by education. The modern religious education movement assumed this theme and adopted a doctrine of “salvation by education.” Smith maintained that such an approach to evangelism is insufficient to maintain the church since the faith of the children tends to be less fervent than that of the previous generation. The revival of religion has not materialized as was expected by the educators. Thus, it seems apparent that something else is necessary for religion to maintain its vitality for culture (100-105).

Smith called for a recognition of the Christian truth that Jesus Christ is the ultimate meaning of life. Given the liberal belief that the ultimate meaning of life must lie in the future, it follows that the teachings of Jesus must be viewed as obsolete. Although the liberal educator would deny such a statement, it must logically follow since admission of an absolute in Jesus would seriously damage the relativistic position necessary to liberal religious education (105-108).

The idea of Christ as the ultimate truth should not necessarily imply that any particular interpretation of Jesus is the absolute truth. Interpretations have changed and

been expressed in many forms. "Changing formulations of the Christian revelation are not incompatible with the belief that Christ himself remains the ultimate meaning of human life" (114).

Adherents of liberal religious nurture tended to claim that this position of salvation by education was consistent with the position held by Horace Bushnell. Smith disagreed and presented as evidence portions of *Christian Nurture* as well as from other later writings showing that the position of liberal religious nurture was incorrect. Smith maintained that the material used to support the liberal position was material intended to argue against a revivalist type conversion. Bushnell reacted against the revivalist contention that the child begins life "devoid of all holy principle." Further, Bushnell argued against a position of the unrepentant child as a "vessel of wrath." Regardless of Bushnell's actual position on Christian nurture, it is evident that the liberal religious education movement claimed him as one of their own and emphasized the goodness of the child to the extreme (116-124).

Smith argued that such a position makes an unrealistic estimation of the possibilities and the purpose of education. Although the revivalist understanding of the nature of the child as evil is incorrect, the liberal understanding of the child as good is also indefensible. An adequate educational system must exist within tension between these two poles of thought. Here Smith was just as critical of the educational system implied by the thought of Karl Barth. Smith wrote that "...the Barthian version of current theology does logically tend toward a too complete denial of the place of human action in Christian salvation" (133). Nevertheless, it was more likely that the liberal position will be accepted than the Barthian position. Thus, it was the liberal position against which Smith warned his readers.

### An Understanding of the Church

Smith wrote that religious educators seem to be less concerned with the nature of the church than any other professional group. There seems to be more affinity for the Sunday-school which, in many ways, tends to be independent of the Church and more similar to secular schools. Other factors which influence the religious educators' lack of interest in developing a doctrine of the Church include a greater interest in religious experience than in institutional forms of religion, emphasis on experimental religion, and a dichotomy between the Kingdom of God and the Church. (136-139).

While in theory the Church is unified, there are certain elements which disrupt its unity. These are factors which indicate that the church has lost its sense of unity in Christ and are warning signs for what will happen in liberal religion. Some sources of disunity include economic factors, racism, nationalism, and sectarianism. The end result is a social organization which nurtures both children and adults in a community which lacks the unity provided by Christ. The end result is something less than desirable (154-166).

Smith stressed the necessity of the Church as a means of divine mediation. Persons are incapable of resolving their dilemmas by individual action, thus it is

necessary for the Church to serve in that role.

### The Consequences of Experimentalism

In examining experimentalist thought, Smith determined that “the religion implicit in progressive democratic education is decisively at variance with that type of religious faith which underlies the doctrine of Christian nurture” (201-202). One result was the secularization of religious education through an educational philosophy. Additionally, Smith indicated that the issue is not whether religion will be taught in schools - it is evident that the experimentalist is a form of religion. The question is whether this anthropocentric religion will be the form which is taught.

### REACTIONS TO *FAITH AND NURTURE*

While the publication of *Faith and Nurture* provided a critique of the Religious Education movement from a source other than Christian Fundamentalism, it did not seem a serious attack to advocates of Religious Education. In the pages of *Religious Education*, Edward Ames dismissed Smith’s critique of traditional liberalism as “wishful thinking” (Ames 1942, 60). He argues that

*Faith and Nurture* is likely to impress the unprejudiced reader with a feeling that there is a deep, widening stream of liberal religious thought and education flowing through the last three centuries and continuing to gain momentum and greater promise for the future (60).

A similar response was provided by Ira Morton's review of the book in *The Journal of Religion*:

This book should be read by those liberals who need the inadvertent suggestions it makes of the soundness of the liberal view. It should be read by the neo-orthodoxy for its equally inadvertent showing of how untenable is their view. Indeed, liberals may well count on this book unintentionally to win further victories for liberal religious education in the battle so well begun by Harrison Elliott's *Can Religious Education be Christian?* while the neo-orthodox will hardly be able to say more for their champion than that he was clear and courteous in his criticism and personally loyal to “the faith” (Morton 1942, 214).

Somewhat more supportive reaction came from other quarters as evidenced by Joseph Martin Dawson's perspective:

Perhaps Hegel's formula of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis may be realized in this dilemma. Orthodoxy furnished the thesis, liberalism set up the antithesis, and now comes the occasion for synthesis. If so, the book has made no inconsiderable contribution toward this end (Dawson 1942, 151).

Stephen Schmidt indicates that *Faith and Nurture* had little response from the

leadership of REA. “The old faithful remained for the most part unrepentant liberals” (1983, 132). Many maintained that position without wavering. In 1950 in hiring a general secretary they selected Harrison Elliott choosing “REA orthodoxy over emerging new theologies” (1983, 109).

In the long run, reaction to Smith seems more favorable. Randolph C. Miller argued that Smith called for a theological reconstruction which Miller continued in his emphasis on theology in religious education (Miller 1982).

Writing in the sixties, Kendig Cully claimed for Smith a major role in “rethinking the theological bases for church education” (1965, 22). He claimed that “Smith initiated, if not an earthquake, at least a major shake-up” (1965, 24). Indeed, for Cully, the conflict between Elliott and Smith serves as the starting point for the movement toward Christian education.

Smith remained steadfast in his perspective arguing that educational progressives “could undertake to reconstruct their theological foundations in light of more realistic insights of current Christian faith” (1951, 244). Indeed, the events of World War II with its Holocaust and the development and use of weapons of mass destruction suggest that the optimistic progressive view of humanity needed significant revision.

Academically, Smith continued to address the theological themes he had broached in *Faith and Nurture* through the rest of his professional life. Instead of addressing them from the field of religious education, however, he worked in the field of American Christianity. His concerns for more realistic theology continued in *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin* (1955) and in *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (1972). His understanding of Horace Bushnell was stressed in his selections of Bushnell’s works published in 1965. In addition, with Robert Handy and Lefferts Loetscher, he prepared the two volume church history classic *American Christianity* (1960, 1963).

Smith was responsible for the development of the doctoral program in religion at Duke University, the first such program in a Southern university. He was a pioneer in the development of the study of American Christianity as a separate field from European Christianity. He encouraged local ecumenical activity as founder and president of the North Carolina Council of Churches (Bowden 1984). His professional homes shifted to the American Society of Church History and the American Theological Society both of whom he served as president in the mid fifties (*Duke Divinity School* 1963). While the cool reception to his ideas may have hastened his departure from religious education, it certainly did not remove him from making a contribution to the academy.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is not easy to place Shelton Smith and his theological position in traditional religious education categories. Interpreters of Smith must be cautious about placing him within the Neo-Orthodox Christian Education camp. While Harold Burgess correctly

recognizes Smith and *Faith and Nurture* as an antecedent to the tradition which he labels as the Contemporary Theological approach (1975, 96), it is common to place Smith within the Neo-Orthodox movement. Mary Boys seems to vacillate between a recognition of Smith either as a precursor to the map she labels as Christian Education or as representative of that field. She writes that "*Faith and Nurture* is a foremost example of those critiques that would ground the classic expression of Christian education." (1989, 69). "Among those concerned with the implications of neo-orthodox thought for religious education, H. Shelton Smith certainly ranks as the foremost interpreter" (78).

Confusion about placing Smith within the later tradition results, at least in part, from Randolph Crump Miller's claim that *Faith and Nurture* served as the "chief stimulus" to his thought that produced *The Clue to Christian Education*. A common interpretation, albeit an overly simplistic one, is the idea that there is a real connection between Smith's work and Miller's work and that both are continuous with the other. While this may seem true from Miller's perspective, it is unlikely to be so from Smith's position. Albert C. Outler, Smith's academic colleague, wrote upon the retirement of Smith from the faculty at Duke University that *Faith and Nurture* "has had no sequel." (1963, 13). It is more accurate to view *Faith and Nurture* as a work which both extremes in religious education, progressivism and fundamentalism, rejected. Outler writes,

There were liberals and fundamentalists alike who saw in it a repudiation of the religious education movement in general. The liberals deplored what they could only construe as apostasy; the fundamentalists took the "elder brother's" attitude toward a penitent prodigal. (12).

More recent work has further advanced this view of Smith as standing apart from the neo-orthodox theological movement. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite writes that Smith

... was often perceived as advocating a conservative neo-orthodoxy. This was not the case, however, because he had an historical perspective that enabled him to draw upon the more theistic expressions of earlier American liberal Protestantism. In his view, liberalism and progressivism represented two distinct positions and his criticism did not involve a wholesale repudiation of liberalism. He was, however, also prodded and influenced by the European neo-orthodoxy and Barthianism that was making its impact on the American scene and had given rise to a new "realistic" theology of which Smith's own theology was becoming representative. (Thistlethwaite 1980)

It seems most accurate to recognize *Faith and Nurture* as a criticism of progressive religious education from within the perspective of a liberal theology. Smith recognized the validity of the criticisms of progressive religious education which were leveled by Neo-Orthodoxy without accepting its conclusions. This position is consistent with the position taken earlier in his essay "Let Religious Educators Reckon With the Barthians," in which he criticizes progressivism from the perspective of the "Barthians" yet also accuses the neo-orthodox movement of "religious agnosticism," "extreme epistemological dualism," and "dogmatic supernaturalism." (1934, 50) For Shelton



Smith the ideal religious education seems to remain undeveloped. As a critic, he was able to recognize the failures of Progressive Religious Education to retain its relevance for a post-liberal world. As a liberal, he was unwilling to accept the dogmatism and authoritarianism of neo-orthodoxy. His work is significant because a major task of good religious education is related to asking questions and questioning presuppositions. Smith does both with great effect.

## Literature Cited

- Ames, E. S. 1942. Review of *Faith and Nurture*. *Religious Education*. 37: 60-61.
- Bowden, H. W. 1984. "Smith, H(ilrie) Shelton." In S.S. Hill, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*. Macon: Mercer University Press.
- Boys, M. C. 1989. *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Burgess, H. W. 1975. *Invitation to Religious Education*. Mishawaka: Religious Education Press.
- Cully, K. B. 1965. *The Search for a Christian Education – Since 1940*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Dawson, J. M. 1942. Calling All Religious Educators. *The Christian Century*. 59, 151.
- The Duke Divinity School Bulletin*. 1963. Professor Hilrie Shelton Smith. 28, 182-183.
- Miller, R. C. 1950. *The Clue to Christian Education*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Miller, R. C. 1982. Theology in the Background. In N. H. Thompson, ed. *Religious Education and Theology*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press.
- Morton, I. A. 1942. Review of *Faith and Nurture*. *The Journal of Religion*. 22, 214.
- Outler, A. C. 1963. H. Shelton Smith: A Memoir. In S. C. Henry, ed. *A Miscellany of American Christianity: Essays in Honor of H. Shelton Smith*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schmidt, S. A. 1983. *A History of the Religious Education Association*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press.
- Smith, H. S. 1929. Religious Education Tomorrow. *International Journal of Religious Education*. 5 (January): 13-14.
- Smith, H. S. 1934. Let Religious Educators Reckon With the Barthians. *Religious Education* 24: 45-51.
- Smith, H. S. 1936. Is Religious Naturalism Enough? *Religious Education* 31: 107-111.
- Smith, H. S. 1941. *Faith and Nurture*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Smith, H. S. 1951. Christian Education. In A. S. Nash, ed. *Protestant Thought in the Twentieth Century: Whence and Whither*. New York: Macmillan.

Thistlethwaite, S. B. 1980. H. Shelton Smith: Critic of the Theological Perspective of Progressive Religious Education, 1934-1950. Ph.D. diss., Duke University, Durham.