

Some Problems In Contemporary Religious Education

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It is the purpose of this article to present and examine three outstanding problems in the field of religious education. These are: the problem of naturalism, the problem of ecumenicalism, and the problem of secularism. As treated herein it is assumed that these problems take root in common soil.

Why are these patterns of thought designated as problems? They are so designated for the reason that their presence in the religious education movement of our time tends to occasion tensions which hinder or frustrate progress. For conservatives the obtrusions of these doctrines compels unceasing vigilance to prevent their infiltration into agencies and methods consecrated to the perpetuation of the Gospel message. Under various guises and veiled in language requiring the most discriminating intelligence naturalism, a liberal ecumenicalism, and outright secularism appear in leadership training texts, curricula for week-day schools of religion, and bibliographical material such as is used in theological seminaries.

It must be borne in mind that in education theory controls practice, and therefore invading or infiltrating theories are problems. They are "something thrown forward" which must be dealt with fairly and decisively.

NATURALISM

Naturalism in religious education rules out the supernatural. It is representative of the age-old effort to exalt

man and reduce God to the dimensions of man's reason. To attempt to rid the Christian world of the concept of God is too bold and gigantic an undertaking to be accomplished in a generation. It requires patience and persistence to persuade the theological mind, trained in the intricacies of logical thought, that there can be the theologian without theology. Perhaps because the incongruity was so obvious theologians of preceding generations hesitated to become the protagonists of an outright atheism, however much they may have been concerned to emphasize and project a concept of nature at whatever cost to the concept of God.

In his notable work, *Faith and Nurture*, Professor H. Shelton Smith of Duke University defines the naturalism of the nineteenth century in terms of several major trends, such as: divine immanence; growth; the goodness of man; the historical Jesus. In this analysis he is referring to what may be termed the romantic movement in theology as it became identified with the philosophy of Darwin.¹ To this movement the term "modernism" has been applied. That term is being supplanted by the word "liberalism" which sometimes connotes an out and out humanism and naturalism in theology and in religious education.

The doctrine of divine immanence, as projected by the romantic school,

¹ Smith, H. Shelton, *Faith and Nurture* (New York: Scribner's, 1942), pp. 4-26.

identifies God with the very essence of nature in what has been defined as "the higher pantheism." The growth theory in religious education is the concept of Horace Bushnell in his intense reaction against revivalism, as amplified and adapted to the Darwinian evolutionary hypothesis religiously by Coe and secularly by John Dewey. The doctrine of the innate goodness of man grew out of an inimical attitude toward the doctrine of the fall of man and of human depravity, and took root in the pantheistic concept of the nature of man. The liberal emphasis upon the historical Jesus is based upon a naturalistic concept of the person of Christ.

For the thoroughgoing realist and naturalist any attempt at compromise with traditional views in religion is distasteful. They repudiate all vague and shadowy vestiges of mysticism such as are suggested by the romantics in a doctrine of transcendence and an interest in "occult speculations" as to life after death. To the naturalist, God is whatever makes the universe "go"; he is the universe. Bower defines God as "running through the structures and processes of the universe".² Chave charges that it is "a useless oversimplification" to posit a personal God. He regards it as irreligious to define spiritual as anything "outside the natural and observable processes of life".³

The effect of these views, were they adopted, upon religious education would be, of course, revolutionary. A basic educational premise with the naturalist in religious education is that indoctrination is not education; that the curriculum as hitherto known must be discarded; that transmissive teach-

ing is archaic; that the church must assume a character which identifies it completely with its greatest foe in every age, unbelief. The church is to succeed by ceasing to be, which is at best a sort of Schopenhauerian conquest of evil. Thus the lion and the lamb are made at last to lie down together, the feat being accomplished (as some one has said) by the lion swallowing the lamb.

ECUMENICALISM

Another significant problem in the field of religious education is ecumenicalism. Minds whose disposition to religion is limited to philosophy possess the philosopher's passion for unity. They must bring the light of reason to sharp focus upon a rational universe. Their concept of universality, if carried to its logical conclusions, would mean the breaking down of all barriers of conviction, of culture, of race, or status, of property, of nationality, of faith, among people. That this may be a negative process involving the disintegration of life itself does not appear to such thinkers. That loyalties and choices are inherent in the nature of things, vegetation having proclivity for soils, metals for magnetism, birds of a feather for each other, beasts of the forest for their mates, does not seem to have occurred to them. That the heart of the home is loyalty and fidelity, and that one's country is an extension of his home; that the heart of the Christian faith is devotion, is entirely ignored. By some hypostasis of ideas the abuses and perversions of loyalty seem to them to be the loyalties themselves, so that all convictions and preferences become for them but harmful emotional states. If one expresses a conviction he is said to be controlled by his emotions, at the expense of his reason.

The ultimate goal of this breaking down of all distinctions seems to be the realization of one world, one religion, one race. This unification, for

² Bower, William Clayton, *Christ and Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), p. 56.

³ Chave, Ernest, *A Functional Approach to Christian Education* (University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 130.

some reason not clear to all thinkers, seems to be the far off divine event toward which the whole creation moves. It appears to be the religious passion, the modern crusade of naturalistic religionists. This emphasis places Dr. John Dewey, whose work has been accepted as practically *ex cathedra*, in the anomalous rôle of the greatest religious leader of his age, one who is destined to be the great patron saint of all time. Desire for such fame has never been ascribed to Dr. Dewey. It is his friends in religious education who are thus seeking his canonization.

It is the subtleties of this liberal ecumenicalism which afford opportunities for shafts to be hurled at non-conformists. A bit of clear thinking concerning the nature of the Church is necessary here. Because the church universal is a great spiritual reality and as such appeals to every true believer, it is unpleasant to be taunted with disloyalty to it. The true church universal excludes no one on the ground of race or nationality. It excludes many on the ground of unbelief and rebellion against God, for just as the man-made ecumenical church of the liberal requires a great measure of unanimity so does the true church universal.

Fortunately, persons are born into the church universal and find themselves by nature at one with it. The new ecumenicalism requires the abandonment of beliefs which unfit one for perfect fellowship with persons of all faiths.

How does the problem of ecumenicalism relate to religious education? It appears in religious education often under the guise of an inclusive policy which might better be named a pragmatic policy. It is hoped by training courses and otherwise to choke out a recalcitrant conservative element in the churches through new doctrinal and practical approaches in religious education. It is also hoped that the

emotionalized opinions of the rank and file may be modified so that they will continue to give their support financially and morally as they witness the disappearance of their distinct denominations on a liberal basis.

The use of the word "community" and the expression "world community" by contemporary leaders in religious education demands our attention. The term church universal is used in a sense quite different from its Biblical connotations. If the world community is to be truly Christian, certainly the ideal is precious to every Christian. It embodies the missionary vision and purpose of the church. However, there has crept into the vocabulary of religious education the term "supranational". Of course our faith transcends national boundaries, but it does not necessarily imply an attitude of anything like sedition on the part of a Christian. Neither should a true ecumenicalism suggest a fusion of the Christian religion with other ethnic faiths.

Paul E. Johnson discusses frankly the meaning of "world community" in the religious sense as one religion. Referring to the "supranational" religions of the world he says that there is a growing sense of community among them; that there are beginnings of "mutual recognition and cooperation" between Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. He cites the acceptance of all these faiths by the International Mission Council in 1928 as "witnesses of man's need of God and allies in our quest of perfection." He quotes Hocking as saying that the way to a world faith is not through "radical displacement" but through discovering "the saving truth in each religion".⁴

Ecumenicalism becomes a problem

⁴ Johnson, Paul E., *Psychology of Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1945), pp. 256-57.

when pressed to the point of breaking down loyalty to the Christian faith itself. This writer is not alone in fearing that the movement has today reached this stage.

SECULARISM

The third problem is that of secularism. This problem is forced by the other two. There are two opinions involved in the question of secularism. The first one is that the public schools should become religious. This is to be achieved by the "liberalization" of religious education to the point that fusion with public education is possible. The second approach is a very candid one and involves the notion that good public education is good religious education. The question is being raised in various circles, if Christianity be watered down to secular levels why fight to maintain the term "religious" at all?

Dr. Ernest Chave in his frankly secular approach to religion, *The Functional Approach to Christian Education*, maintains that religious education will become increasingly attractive as it "draws into cooperative relationship leaders and workers from all areas and interests of our complex world." The words "cooperative relationship" seem to preserve the idea of distinction between religion and secularism. A further word helps to clarify Dr. Chave's position: religious education must "speak in terms which honor the natural processes, and which integrate the learnings from all of life." He objects to what he terms the "departmentalization of religion" by even the most liberal ecumenical agencies. He feels that people are not justified in maintaining "traditional ideas and practices as the basis of organization and cooperation".⁵

The Eakins, in their recent book *The Pastor and the Children* frankly

acknowledge the implications of the naturalistic trend in religious education by heading the last chapter, "How Avoid Being Secular?" Dr. Eakin comments in this chapter on what he apparently feels to be the smugness of evangelicals. He infers that the frequent use of the name of God and of Christ is insisted upon by some people as indicative of the religious nature of the teaching. As against this view he says that any teaching which puts Christian principles at work in life is religious. Then by further statements he sustains what the writer of this article has maintained, namely, that there is a distinct relationship in the thought patterns of naturalism, liberal ecumenicalism, and secularism. He diverts from the discussion of secularism to say that he one time heard a woman missionary from India give a talk to Sunday-school children in a large suburban church. She depicted the ignorance and degradation of India and recited some horrors. Dr. Eakin felt that she very unfairly and one-sidedly presented the Gospel to these children. She referred frequently to "our God" and "our Jesus", ignoring the riches of India's own spiritual inheritance in Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore. He wished that those children were getting something else that morning "than a picture of a foreign people who weren't "nice" and wouldn't be until we took them *our* Jesus". So disturbed was he by it all that he says he was not concerned about where the line should be drawn between the religious and the secular. Contact with everyday life and needs, he maintains, is of prior importance to any "guarding of religion's preserves from contamination by the secular".

According to Dr. Eakin any pastor who is concerned about the religious and the secular is encouraged to set his fears of secularization aside and plunge ahead, for there is a good chance that after several years the dilemma of the religious or the secular

⁵ Chave, Ernest J., *op. cit.*, pp. 130-31.

will have more or less disappeared.⁶

From the foregoing, it appears that Christian religious education faces a trinity of foes in naturalism, liberal ecumenicalism, and secularism; and that these three are in their essential tendency *one*. Moreover, the threat from these viewpoints is acute primar-

⁶ Eakin, Mildred Moody, and Frank, *The Pastor and the Children* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), pp. 164-65, 171.

ily because they are espoused by those within the church. They are being utilized as shaping principles in the education of leaders for religious education, both lay and professional. To those who espouse and love the historic Christian faith the situation emphasizes the demand for a clear and vigorous evangelical theory and strategy, and for alertness lest the faith which has been committed to the saints be pushed aside without their realizing what is taking place.

THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER

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Harold Greenlee, B.D., Ph.D., Professor of New Testament Greek; C. Elvan Olmstead, B.D., Ph.D., Professor of Christian Education; Claude H. Thompson, A.B., B.D., (Resident work completed for Ph.D., Drew University), Professor of Doctrine; James D. Robertson, Ph.D., Professor of Practical Theology.

The Thanksgiving offering for the building fund of the seminary was initiated at the chapel and inaugural services on October the 22nd, when the faculty, student body, and friends contributed approximately \$3,000. This offering was preliminary to the annual Thanksgiving appeal through the Pentecostal Herald.

A twenty-four hour vigil of prayer was held by the faculty and student body on October the 15th. We request the friends of the seminary to remember us daily in prayer. We need money for the building program and other urgent needs of the seminary, but more than money, we need prayer.

The annual Ministers' Conference will be held February 24 to 26. The Lizzie H. Glide lectures for the conference will be delivered by Bishop Fred P. Corson and Bishop L. R. Marston. Reservations for entertainment should be sent to Dean W. D. Turkington, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Ky.