

# 'Can Religious Education Be Christian?'

A CRITIQUE OF HARRISON ELLIOTT'S VOLUME

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Perhaps the greatest value of this recent contribution to the Coe-Bower school of thought is the panoramic — one might almost say kaleidoscopic — view which it affords of so much that is being said in theological and educational circles. It makes a number of emphases which are of considerable significance. Our first concern, however, in order that we may discuss the book intelligently, is to bring into focus just what it says. For this purpose perhaps the best procedure will be to state in one sentence what seems to be the main point in each of the fifteen chapters. Such a statement is herewith given:

I. The modern educational approach "has implications which challenge the theological assumptions of the churches,"<sup>1</sup> and especially of those theologians who stress the thought that "Christianity is a revealed religion."<sup>2</sup>

II. Religious liberty was won in America as far as public education was concerned, but the "Sunday School carried on the authoritarian tradition."<sup>3</sup>

III. The Herbartian procedure, which attempts to impose an idea upon pupils and then leaves to them putting it into practice, has at last been "challenged from within the official Christian education of the churches themselves."<sup>4</sup>

IV. There is at present a clash of opinions as to whether the educational and missionary work of the church should be conceived as the propagation

of an authoritative "apostolic theocentric" faith,<sup>5</sup> or as a shared study of religion with liberty for all to arrive at personal interpretations.

V. No uniform interpretation of the Christian faith is given in the New Testament, therefore people today must be free to "find for themselves the meaning of the Christian faith."<sup>6</sup>

VI. Paul and Barth to the contrary, human knowledge is important for the understanding of religion and for "revising the interpretations where they have been influenced by inadequate or false conceptions."<sup>7</sup>

VII. The conception of the autocratic sovereignty of God leads, not to "the direct reign of God but the authority of parents, teachers, ministers, and rulers which is identified with the will of God."<sup>8</sup>

VIII. There is need for more discrimination in the use of the word "sin," and for suiting "what is done in the educational process to the character of the difficulty."<sup>9</sup>

IX. The effort to deal with the human predicament through an educational process is not made impracticable by the evil tendencies of human nature, for "there are no such well-defined inborn tendencies in man, either good or evil."<sup>10</sup>

X. The social strategy of education is that of organizing the life of groups in such a way that "the individual is turned from individual striving to cooperative effort,"<sup>11</sup> thereby removing

<sup>1</sup> Elliott, Harrison S.: *Can Religious Education be Christian?* (New York, Macmillan, 1940), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

the clash between egos.

XI. "If religious education is to be thus basically reconstructive, there must be a shift from efforts to help individuals as individuals to the enlistment of individuals in the reconstruction of the life of which they are a part,"<sup>12</sup> and by which their own characters are inevitably conditioned.

XII. Christian ethics is relevant to an educational process centered in actual situations: "the ideal of love can be made both the goal and the dynamic of such a process."<sup>13</sup>

XIII. "The social process of religious education, which critics of religious education fear because they think it is centered too much in human life, is the very process which gives the largest promise of bringing about a vital experience of God."<sup>14</sup>

XIV. Religious education "will need to embody in worship the recognition . . . that whatever the interpretation of God, his manifestations and resources are immanent in his world; second, that these resources are available only as man discovers and meets the conditions for their release."<sup>15</sup>

XV. A social and experience-centered educational process may be trusted when "individuals and groups have been captured by the possibilities of love made manifest in Christ."<sup>16</sup>

This summary of Elliott's thought reveals that the integrating idea in the negative phase of his argument is that "An experience-centered educational process is inconsistent . . . with positions dogmatically and finally held."<sup>17</sup> His constructive proposals call for engaging people in cooperative effort toward that approximation of the Kingdom of God "which is possible to human beings in their social arrange-

ments."<sup>18</sup>

There is much truth in the position that in order best to help individuals we must get them moving cooperatively toward a goal. A pamphlet entitled "Goal-Conscious Churches" recently sent out by Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Chicago (now McCormick Theological Seminary) says, "When the members of a church are working together with a common purpose that is worthy of their combined resources, trivial personality-adjustment and social-adjustment problems are submerged. They are kept out of the area of serious concern and of action." Truly, the wholehearted service of a cause has power to lift one above petty worries and jealousies. A lack of something significant to do is a factor in even major personality disorders. An organism is set to function, and when it is prevented from functioning disruptive results may be expected. And then, whether people need the physical and spiritual exercise or not, there are needs which call so imperatively for self-sacrificing attention that it behooves the church to move toward meeting them. A church which sits idly by while Satan is mobilizing his forces can hardly expect to survive itself.

In the final paragraph of the book Elliott says that confidence can be placed in the educational process, that is, in the sort of program he has been sketching, "only as individuals and groups have been captured by the possibilities of love made manifest in Christ, as the goal of the Kingdom of God has become the dominating purpose of their lives, and as fellowship with God has become an actual experience."<sup>19</sup> In this statement he comes very near to giving away his whole case. He admits that his program of action is valid only after what may be considered the chief aims of

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

Christian education have been attained. What he has done is to move the focus of attention out beyond the individuals with whom we have to deal into the social scene. The task of the church is to reeducate society, not simply to save souls. He as much as says that changing society is the way to save souls. There are, he says, enough church members in the country to turn the tide. But as valid as this phase of his program is, we need to remember that such was not the method of the early Christian church. The members of that church did not go out preaching a message of social reform to be carried out by their still pagan neighbors as a means of bringing the Kingdom of God. Rather, the message was an offer of salvation from sin and an invitation to fellowship with God and the brethren in Christ. On the basis of Elliott's own statement some such evangelistic work had to precede the program of social education. People had to be captured by Christian ideals before they could be expected to act in accordance with them. Almost the only attention he has given to this phase of the problem in this book is to admit that some people will not accept the Christian way of life. The main objection, then, to his program of social education is not what he proposes, but what he leaves unsaid.

There is, however, an assumption behind all of Elliott's thinking which will be unacceptable to many members of the existing churches, and which clashes sharply with the point of view of this paper. This is his position of naturalism. Elliott would not consent to be called a non-theist, though he leaves it an open question as far as the subject in hand is concerned whether God is other than "distinctive and pervading characteristics of the universe as it impinges upon human life."<sup>20</sup> At any rate Elliott places

all the stress on the immanence of the divine, rather than on God's transcendence, and on human activity in discovering and using the given resources in the universe rather than on the self-revealing and saving power of God.

Such an emphasis furnishes a corrective for an uncritical supernaturalism. On the other hand, it leaves out what is most distinctive in New Testament Christianity. The central emphasis on love is retained, but the question of the personal existence of God is treated as so unessential that it may be passed by. The whole tremendous issue of life after death is waived with the single word "otherworldly." Jesus is central in the Christian religion, but such teachings of his as have been preserved for us hardly supply us with an authoritative faith. Sin is treated as a psychological and social problem. The communion of saints is passed by as a worth-while goal of Christian education. The element of tragedy in life is recognized at least verbally, but is hardly handled seriously. The possibility of direct aid by God in answer to prayer is not a part of the picture. The experience of the "new birth" has been more or less a failure as far as the larger condition of society is concerned. Thus Elliott leaves in the background everything which reaches beyond the natural order of events, and says that if conditions are to be changed, we are the ones who will have to see that it is done. If it were convenient, one wonders what would keep Elliott from taking the final step into out-and-out humanism.

We must not allow ourselves to be thrown into a Barthian type of reaction against this immanentist point of view. God has called his children to be workers together with him. Truly, the fields are ripe and the laborers are few. But it is God who both gives the harvest and sustains by his fellowship

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

those who go to reap it. We should not allow ourselves to be deceived by the remnants of conventional terminology which Elliott retains as to his real meaning behind them. There must be fellowship with God — yes. But it is not clear in what sense one is to have fellowship with “the Given, which we call God,”<sup>21</sup> or how one is to find “that courage in the presence of defeat and calm in the face of tragedy, which the experience of the providential relation of God to human life and destiny in historic prayer and worship supplied.”<sup>22</sup>

In view of the fact that Elliott shares a point of view which has diverged so widely from traditional Christianity, it is not surprising that he should lay great stress on freedom from any fixed orthodoxy. It is well also to keep in mind that Elliott is a discussion leader, and that for him “conference” is the central educational method.<sup>23</sup> It would be easy for such a person to drift into an attitude that anything which is not problematical is not important. Some such assumption lies just below the surface in the present book. It is important for us, however, to distinguish two aspects of the question, whether real education must be based on problem solving. One is whether this is the only approach which results in vital learning, which Elliott clearly implies is the case. The other aspect of the question is whether this is the only approach which is desirable, even if other approaches are practicable. Elliott’s attitude on this is strongly in the affirmative, as far as the general spirit of an educational process is concerned. A school without the discussion of problems would be to him a very stupid place.

Relative to the first half of the problem, N. E. Richardson says, “The

convictions are spreading rapidly in the churches that an authoritative scripture can be taught creatively . . . that spontaneity of belief can be realized as a result of indoctrination . . . .”<sup>24</sup> This doubtless represents the point of view which Elliott characterizes as a modified Herbartianism, according to which the best educational techniques may be adapted to teaching ideas determined beforehand. It hardly seems that it will be possible for Elliott to rule this out as effective education. Certainly he would have to go beyond the rather superficial way in which he disposes of Herbartianism in the present book. But even on his own psychological grounds the effectiveness of such a program as Richardson suggests seems probable. Elliott accepts the theory that human nature is quite plastic in the young, and so avoids a defeatist emphasis on human depravity. But this very plasticity makes possible a wide variety of educational procedures which may be used with success — if making mental changes may be called success. Besides, is it not a matter of common observation that a person with convictions can pass these convictions on to others without necessarily going through all the reasons for and against his point of view? Indeed, Elliott himself says there is a need for some authority. Adults should give guidance “as the basis for a true autonomy.”<sup>25</sup> So he implicitly admits that at least some elements of so-called Herbartianism can be effective.

We turn to the more important question of the *desirability* of indoctrination. It is a timely question, in view of the recent upsurge of the militant forces of totalitarianism and the consequent reemphasis on the democratic way of life. It is a question which calls

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>23</sup> *Cf. Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> In a review of Elliott’s book in the *Alumni Review*, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (Jan. 1941), pp. 179-80.

<sup>25</sup> Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

for careful and discriminating thought. One recalls William James' recognition of the fact that the needs of the audience have a bearing on the attitude which a speaker should take. He said in the preface that if he had been addressing the Salvation Army he should have reversed the emphasis given in *The Will to Believe*. There are dogmatic groups which need the corrective of such an emphasis as Elliott has given. Indeed, because of their fixed ideas, conservative people are often unable to interpret the actual content of the Bible as accurately as those who do not take that content as seriously. Perhaps Elliott's book would have some influence on such groups, if they would read it. But it does not have as much at this point to offer to those who are already confused and confusing their hearers in the name of liberal Christianity. Perhaps it will furnish them the rationale with which to approach their traditionalist neighbors in a continued spirit of controversy. At least, Elliott brings the issues out into view.

The real point is, not that there is no place for the authority of those who know, but that Elliott does not believe that traditional Christian beliefs can be substantiated. If what is asked for is absolute proof, that is true. On the other hand, the interpretations favored by the immanentist view cannot be proven either as having the exclusive truth. Yet Elliott does not exactly say that since nothing is conclusive we might as well let everybody take his choice. He certainly would try to keep people from accepting a Barthian point of view. He wants the educational process to be based on his premises. These premises involve his naturalistic point of view. Because Homrighausen holds that (in Elliott's words) "the religion which is to be taught is authoritative because it is a direct revelation from God," Elliott says of him, "He is

basically in conflict with the theory of progressive education."<sup>26</sup> This shows that a basic consideration is the validity of revelation. For the most part Elliott tries to sidestep the question by showing that, whatever valid revelation there may have been, the interpretations of it are not dependable, or at least do not all agree. He goes through the New Testament with his magnifying glass looking for divergencies, rather than for basic unities. With a similar approach it is probable that he would find that even progressive educators are in disagreement with one another. Still he would have us see the real source of authority "in the educational process itself."<sup>27</sup> Apparently we must choose a point of view before we can project a program.

Elliott grants the importance of convictions.<sup>28</sup> But are we to be allowed to pass our convictions on to others? He holds that religious education should not become "a means for indoctrinating children and youth in a particular set of Christian interpretations."<sup>23</sup> If by this he means that it is undesirable to make children feel that in order to be a Christian one must be a member of a particular church, certainly his position is justified. But he goes much farther than this. He sides with the report of the Laymen's Inquiry which would rescind Christ's commission to make disciples of all nations and would have us look forward to the "continued co-existence"<sup>30</sup> of Christianity and non-Christian religions. This is not acceptable as the program of the churches. What the church is commissioned to preach is Christ and the power of his resurrection, not the eventual merger of all faiths into a sort of Baha-ism. As believers that Jesus embodied the way,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

the truth, and the life, Christians must witness to that conviction and persuade men of its truth.

We now turn to certain other aspects of Elliott's thought which may be approached by a consideration of the concept of "experience." This is a good Methodist word as well as a progressive educator's word. The two lines of thought mingle in what Elliott says. In fact, a certain basic relationship exists between the meanings of the word in the two senses. The parson and the pedagogue would both tell you that it is not enough for a youngster to learn his Sunday-school lesson; the truth must enter into his experience. It begins to come into view that "experience" should not be understood simply in the sense of activities. It is something psychological, and as such centers in the mind of the individual. Sleepwalking does not qualify as experience in the full sense of the term. Likewise, a hurried repetition of the Lord's prayer to get it out of the way does not qualify as constructive experience. What is done must be planned so as to have its full effect within the personality of those participating. This vital emphasis is brought into play by Elliott in his treatment of sin. One needs to be guarded; psychiatric treatment should not be substituted for faith in God. But Elliott sounds a much-needed note when he points out the disadvantages of applying the word "sin" to nearly everything we do regardless of the attitude of the persons involved. It is in this area that one may be most enthusiastic in support of Elliott in his opposition to a

Barthian and Calvinistic theology.

Here, also, at the point of experience, we shake hands on the question of authority. However sure one may be of the truth of Christianity, yet individuals must not be forced in their acceptance of it by inquisitorial methods. This is not to say that no distinction is to be made between Christians and non-Christians; it may be insisted upon, when men are applying for positions of leadership in the church. But a faith which is to operate from inside a person must be willingly accepted by the person. He must begin to act on it as his own chosen way of life. The thought of Christ waiting patiently outside the door is of the utmost significance. Whether he stands at the threshold of a child or of an adult, the door must be unlatched from within. Otherwise the motions of piety may be secured for a time, but deep convictions have not taken hold of the life.

This should not be interpreted as meaning, as Elliott would lead us to believe, that the Herbartian procedure has no place. A restudy of Herbart would reveal that Herbart was concerned that learning should become a vital part of children's experience. The main difficulty probably was that his emphasis was too exclusively intellectual. For the teaching of content the Herbartian procedure is still valid. What must be pointed out is that other procedures in line with Elliott's program should be combined with it to give a rounded experience of Christian education, expressing and based on an abiding faith.