



Religious Education: Some Basics

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A theme closely identified with education is that of the “basics.” in this essay there is a twofold intent with respect to that theme: (1) to describe the positions of two influential writers in the field—Locke Bowman and John Westerhoff; and (2) to review two books that deal with a wide range of basic issues for religious education.

The basic issue in religious education today for Locke E. Bowman is the task of teaching. In his books, *Straight Talk About Teaching in Today's Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) and *Teaching Today: The Church's First Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), he argues that religious education in congregational life needs to recapture the importance of the relationship between the teacher, the learner and the community of faith, and to find ways for restoring the vital function of the teacher in that relationship.

Bowman cautions that religious education is in trouble in our churches when the role of teacher is not encouraged and supported as it should be. He contends that Christian education is instruction, a specific domain of activity within the church. When that domain of activity is neglected, church members are left with a generalized experience of Christian belief, and the church in general is in danger of losing its focus upon confession within and mission without.

Bowman presents a model for religious education that is based upon the best social sciences have to offer and that aims at the knowledge of religion through the faith commitment of Christianity. The Christian teacher, he says, is an activator of the creative capacity of all God's people for organizing and reorganizing life in meaningful ways.

Bowman's chief interest is to equip teachers for this specific role in the community of faith. He, therefore, devotes much of his writings in both books to helping teachers with their tasks, bringing focus to both theories and methods useful in congregational settings.

For John H. Westerhoff, the fundamental concern of educational ministry in the congregation is to provide Christian nurture through catechesis.

Catechesis, though not identical with everything the faith community does, encompasses the whole community in the task of nurture. It involves all mem-

bers of the congregation, at their different places in the pilgrimage of faith, and aims to help them in the responsibilities faith puts upon them: community with God and community with fellow human beings. Catechesis seeks to integrate spiritual life and ministry, preparing persons for meaningful rituals in the light of daily life and for faithful daily life in the light of the

community's rituals.

Westerhoff's chief interest, therefore, is with the teaching/learning function of the whole faith community in which the heritage and mission of the Christian faith are learned and taught by everyone as together they live into their baptism and strive to be faithful under God's grace.

In two of his books, especially, Westerhoff has expressed his views about Christian nurture in the faith community. These are *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976) and *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980). Here and in other books he provides many helps and suggestions for the faith community to come to know and exercise its role as teacher/learner. He contends that the more people discover the life of faith coming to expression in others, the more the Christian story and vision can be known, internalized and lived out in faithful response to the gospel in the community of the church and in the world. The real question for Christian nurture in the church is, How can we be faithful together?

Although the book was first printed in 1975, Harold Burgess' *An Invitation to Religious Education* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1975) is one that is pivotal for a present understanding of historical, theological, and educational developments in the field. Burgess did an exhaustive study of the leading writers in religious education over the past 75-80 years and concluded that these writers could be categorized into four rather distinct approaches: the traditional, the social culture, the contemporary theological, and the social sciences.

Burgess described each of these approaches in terms of its response to six questions that are not only basic to Burgess but appear to be central to just about all educational theorists. The questions with respect to religious education are: What is the purpose? What is the content? What is the context? Who is the teacher? Who is the student? and, What is the role of evaluation? Although Burgess succeeds in placing his selected writers into a specific approach without misrepresenting them, he has achieved this only by allowing some flexibility in the boundaries which limit each of the approaches.

There is much to be gained by reading and reflecting upon this book. It does provide an historical introduction to religious education in 20th century America. The questions asked and the terminology used by Burgess provide even more than a basic vocabulary for the religious educator. (Some unfamiliar with educational jargon may find the language more of an obstacle than a benefit.) Most valuable to the reader, however, will be the opportunity to discover where his or her views come together with those described by Burgess, and how those views fit together both in practice and in the development of a theoretical system.

One criticism, and there may be many more, that could be offered is Burgess' obvious bias for the social science approach. The whole process of analysis used to describe the first three approaches reflects that preference, and the final section is an argument for adopting that approach in educational ministry. Two things make this bias somewhat palatable. First, Burgess admits his position in the Introduction. And second, he recognizes that the social science ap-

proach needs to be augmented with a theological position. That realization, however, leads to the question as to whether or not the final approach reflects a distinctly religious, or Christian, approach to educational ministry. While readers are being introduced to some basic approaches

to religious education, they may make that determination for themselves.

If one is really concerned with the basic issues of Christian education, then there is a need to read Thomas Groome's *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). Unlike many books in the field, his is comprehensive as well as thorough in dealing with the core issues of the subject. Though the notion of depth cannot be demonstrated in this brief review, the breadth of Groome's work can be suggested here.

To begin, one basic question for all educators is that of purpose. After surveying a variety of candidates, Groome settles for a purpose directly linked with the Kingdom of God. Another constant issue is that of the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian education. He refuses to be drawn into a polarized position represented in an "all or nothing at all" response to that question. Clearly affirming that faith is God's gift, he goes on to carve out a significant ministry for education in the church.

Though his book is not intended to be a philosophical tome, Groome does not avoid the philosophical issues. He defines his notion about what it means to educate (and in that definition lies the value of his approach to teaching), and addresses the epistemological question of knowing. In the case of the latter there may be some who will be of the opinion that Groome gives more than they want, but the reading will pay off in a deeper appreciation of the educational ministry of the church.

Growth and development are rapidly becoming, if they aren't already, basic concerns for teachers in the church. Groome does an excellent job of surveying the work of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler and then applying their work to Christian religious education. For the one looking for a clear and concise description of this research, this book is it. The close of the book is a beautiful treatment of the subjects of the teacher, the learner, and the ministry of education in the church.

Three other aspects of this book make it commendable as a basic text. First is its bibliography. If there are resources available that Groome has not consulted or referred to in some way, there cannot be many. For those, and there may be some, who are of the opinion that little has been written on the subject of religious education, this book may provide a bit of a surprise. Second, the book is written in a clear and understandable style. Though he deals with challenging philosophical and theological issues, the book is very readable. Finally, he is consistent. Groome begins with the notion that theory and practice must be joined in praxis. As he concludes his book he illustrates how he has pulled this off in settings varying from a class of eight year olds to seminarians. One finishes the book with the impression that Groome is correct in much of what he has said, and what he can do as a teacher, others can do as well.