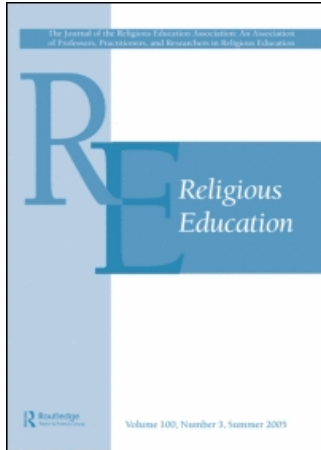


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PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

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In a passage from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice asks the Cheshire Cat:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
"I don't much care where—" said Alice.
"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
"—so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.
"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough"
(Carroll 1941).

As we study and reflect on "Religious Education for Peace and Justice," we want to get *somewhere*, but not just *anywhere*. The last thing we want or can afford is for the Religious Education Association to be "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." REA was founded to be a voice not only among a broad range of practitioners, scholars, and administrators in religious education, but also to the international public sector. Our topic is vital to all and should be heard by all those audiences.

Further, as an international and ecumenical organization, REA is in a unique position to address matters of peace and justice in a world in conflict at every level, from domestic violence to international conflicts based on economics, resources, and religious differences. I harbor no illusions (nor delusions) that, as a result of our considerations in our meeting last November or in this issue of our journal, we will awake within the next few months to a utopia in which all is peace and harmony and where (to paraphrase Isaiah and Micah of the Jewish and Christian canon) all swords have been beaten into plowshares and all spears into pruning hooks. Rather, my hope is that each of us will find ways in which—step by step, person by person, congregation by congregation, classroom by classroom—our service as religious educators will open the hearts and minds of those whom we teach and serve, to

the creative possibilities and alternative ways of looking at themselves, others, and their world.

The purpose of this particular introduction is not to review the wonderful papers, workshops, and other presentations at our meeting last November. Nor is it to preview the articles in this edition of *Religious Education*. It is to prepare our minds and hearts to hear and learn from them. There are few, if any, easy answers. We will likely find the struggle painful at points.

First, we set the stage and prepare ourselves for this vital issue and for what we will do in the future by considering our common purpose as religious educators. It seems that our common purpose should be that of benefiting all of humanity. John Amos Comenius, often referred to as “the Father of Modern Education,” over 300 years ago put it this way: “We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood. To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or because he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly. Desist, I implore you, for we are all equally human. . . . Let us have but one end in view, the welfare of humanity” (Comenius 1657).

We seriously consider our common purpose in this way not by ignoring or denying our national origins and loyalties, but by laying them aside for the moment and, perhaps, rearranging our priorities. This requires a humility that we human beings find difficult. As Mark Twain (1992) once wrote regarding human pride at the points of nationalism and religion:

Man [sic] is the only Patriot. He sets himself apart in his own country, under his own flag, and sneers at the other nations, and keeps multitudinous uniformed assassins on hand at heavy expense to grab slices of other people's countries, and keep them from grabbing slices of his. And in the intervals between campaigns he washes the blood of his hands and works for “the universal brotherhood of man”—with his mouth.

Man is the Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion—several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, and cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight.

Second, we set the stage and prepare ourselves for what we will do in the future by not taking ourselves so seriously, but rather learning to laugh at ourselves with all our foibles, inconsistencies, and frailties. We far too often find ourselves reacting to others in the every day

microcosm of our lives in ways that contradict the stands we take on global issues. For example, how often might we rail at the driver who cut us off in traffic—while we are on our way to a conference on world peace?

Third, this humility further requires we be willing to ask questions and admit to ourselves and to others that we do not have (all) the answers. Some of the most powerful yet simple songs are those that ask questions. One of these, with which many of us are already familiar, asks questions. The poignancy of “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan is found in its many questions as well as the refrain of elusive answers, “the answer, my friend is blowin’ in the wind.”

Defining and understanding the essence of peace and justice are basic to what we should be about as Religious Educators. The realization of these tasks can only rise out of our sense of common purpose and humility.

Peace, we know, is not “simply” the absence of conflict. Peace is also the presence and reality of well-being and completeness, which find their antitheses in poverty, despair, hunger, and oppression. Throughout history, these were not only antitheses to peace, but, in and of themselves they inevitably and ultimately have led to armed conflict. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer (2003) has pointed out that the three-dimensional spiral of violence enunciated by liberation theology begins with Violence 1, which is characterized by hunger, poverty, and oppression and ends in Violence 3, which involves organized and formalized repression—usually on the parts of governments. However, to these Nelson-Pallmeyer adds Violence 4 and Violence 5. Violence 4 is reflected in “community breakdown” and crime. We see this manifested daily in domestic violence and the “mean streets” of almost any city in the world. Violence 5 is the religious dimension in which violence is expressed through “[the] Spiritual, Divine Threats, Awaiting God’s Violence, [and] Human Violence in God’s Name.” It is Violence 5 that characterizes the majority of the war and conflict on today’s international scene. All five of these dimensions cry out for our attention.

Typically, we define and perceive peace on the basis of the absence of its antithesis, conflict, in *our* lives and that of *our* respective nations, countries, and faith communities. Examples abound. Ask for the date of the beginning of World War II and the answer one gets will often depend on the perspective of the respondent. Most U.S. citizens will place it at December 7, 1941. Europeans tend to answer with September 1, 1939, whereas most Jews would be hard-pressed to overlook November 9, 1938, the date of Kristallnacht. Chinese might

give July 7, 1937, and Ethiopians and other North Africans may date it to 1935. Unfortunately, the less war, violence, poverty, hunger, and oppression touch us, the less we are aware and the less they mean. They remain abstractions. But *we* are at peace—as if that is all that really matters.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. (2001) challenged our thinking and this, our egocentrism: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” This of course, leads us to ask if there can, indeed, be peace without justice.

Justice is often said to signify the most important of the cardinal virtues. It is a moral quality which, ideally, inclines the will of the individual to give to others that which belongs to them. Justice is a concept involving the fair treatment of all persons. It is often seen as the continued effort to do what is “right.” In most cases what one regards as “right” is determined by consulting or referring to some authority. Most religionists find such authority in the contexts of their respective sacred writings. However, we tend to see justice in terms of what is most expeditious and/or advantageous to us and ours.

Nelson-Pallmeyer (2001) also has written, “Justice is God’s character embodied in human relationships and national life.” This calls us to much more objectivity. Further, if Nelson-Pallmeyer is correct, instruction in and for justice should be at the heart of any religious education. Unfortunately, all too often, religions pay little more than lip service to justice and peace. Rather, history demonstrates that, as any religion becomes increasingly institutionalized, it seems to incline more naturally toward erecting or reinforcing barriers to peace and justice rather than overcoming or dismantling them.

The barriers to peace and justice could be said to start with self-idolatry. Despite the passages in our respective sacred texts that call us to work for peace and justice, our egocentrism so shapes our hermeneutics—and our religious pedagogy—that we form our “God” in our image. The result is that we feel free to live as we *really* wish with little, if any, serious intervention by the Divine, Who would challenge and change us. John Shelby Spong (1998) expresses it well: “It is typical of religious people to make idols out of their religious words. Perhaps in their quest for security, they identify their concept of God with God. When that concept is challenged, they think God is being challenged.” Simply put, just who do we think we are—God? We are too humble to say that—far too proud of our humility.

Certainly it is appropriate for one to be a person of studied and informed conviction regarding our respective religions, theologies, and

sacred texts. However, as our late colleague, Maria Harris (1996) once observed: “Sometimes we possess things so long we come to think of them as ours, even though they don’t belong to us.” We may have a grasp of truth, but truth is not *ours*. It is beyond us and, if it is indeed truth, it should own us.

Secondly, and as a result of the foregoing, we do not take God seriously enough—at least not the teachings *of* God. One example can be seen in the content of most Christian creeds. They begin with issues related to Jesus’ pre-existence and birth and, then, move on to those related to Jesus’ death and resurrection—and a statement or two on eschatology. Few contain much, if anything, on Jesus’ teaching and life. This is not a problem in Christianity only, but is mirrored in any religion and religious education in which catechesis has had more to do and is more concerned with orthodoxy than orthopraxy. In any religious tradition it seems much easier to teach (and learn) propositional truths than to live by the foundational ethos those truths demand.

What religious educators and religious education for peace and justice must do is seek a shift of perspective characterized in transformational learning proposed by Jane E. Regan (2002) in *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation*. Such a pedagogy, Regan suggests (and I agree) is vital to learning that will free us all to creatively explore peace and justice and the means by which we may work toward them.⁹

One place to begin our quest for a new perspective is to learn to laugh—laugh at ourselves and our folly, our feeble attempts to encapsulate the Transcendent/Eternal into words, and so on that we can “get our arms around” and, ultimately, control. How true the words of Shakespeare, “what fools these mortals be” (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act II, scene ii).

My proposal is not that theological reflection and our other such tasks be taken lightly. Quite the opposite. Regarding theological truths, the journey is of ultimate importance. To be a fellow traveler and a guide with our students is a privilege of the highest order. The more seriously we are about that pilgrimage the more we will realize that our ability to *fully* grasp and comprehend the Divine is—literally—laughable.

The next step is for us to become more creative in our approaches to and our pedagogies for peace and justice. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) reflected on the possibility of embodying “our best insights about teaching and learning in a social movement that

might revitalize education.” My belief is that our best and most creative pedagogical insights can result in a movement that can revitalize religious education, our families, our congregations, our institutions, our larger faith communities, our societies, and our world in a quest for peace and justice.

In 1984 Dr. Seuss told the story of the Cold War through *The Butter Battle Book*. It is the allegory about the arms race and concerned two groups: the Yooks and the Zooks. The two were similar in every way—except for one. The Yooks buttered their bread on the topside, but the Zooks buttered their bread on the bottom. The quarrel between the Yooks and the Zooks begins over something of minor importance. After each skirmish, the Yooks develop a bigger and more potent weapon. In return, the Zooks do the same. The conflict escalates until, finally, both the Yooks and the Zooks had doomsday devices ready and positioned to be dropped on the other. The book ends with this exchange between the now old and narrator and his grandson as they consider the situation and the arsenals:

*“Be careful Grandpa,
Be careful! Oh gee!
Who will drop it, will you or will he?”
“I don’t know,” Grandpa replied,
“We’ll see.
We shall see.”* (Dr. Seuss 1984)

What will we learn and take from our study and reflection on “Religious Education for Peace and Justice”? What difference will that make in our congregations, faith communities, classrooms, society, and world? I do not know. I do have hope. We shall see. As the refrain goes, “The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

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