

Editorial (for Religious Education 98.4, Fall 2003)

The founding meeting of the Religious Education Association took place in Chicago, Illinois in February of 1903. It is fair to say that the birth of the REA marks the beginnings of the modern religious education movement in North America, even while roots may be traced into the 19th century and the story of the REA is not the whole story of modern religious education. Distinguishing characteristics of this movement include: 1) commitment to make use of insights from the social sciences (especially developmental psychology) in conceiving challenges and strategies for religious education, 2) growing awareness of religious pluralism and the secularization of the public arena, and 3) conviction that religious education can and must be held to high academic and professional standards so as to fulfill its task of contributing to the development of a vibrant and moral democratic society. Evidence of these characteristics may be seen in the speeches given at the 1903 founding REA convention.¹ Selections by William Rainey Harper, John Dewey, and George Albert Coe from among these opening addresses are currently available at the REA website (www.religioeducation.net).

Through his long and active career Coe may well have had more influence on the REA and the field of religious education in the first half of the 20th century than any other individual. In his opening remarks at the 1903 convention he made the case that religion is a normal capacity of the human mind that must be developed along with other capacities. He was concerned that this vital aspect of education was falling by the wayside in the secularization of public education and that the church and home must now take on this task of religious education for the health of the whole society. The REA was to support this effort with dedicated scholarship and a coordination of professional and organizational efforts.

Harper, then president of the University of Chicago, is widely considered the primary visionary and organizer of the REA. In part, that vision was inspired by the successful World Parliament of Religions held at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. U.S. society was becoming increasingly aware of itself as multicultural and multifaith. At the turn of the century there was optimism among REA founders that religious education might nurture inter-religious tolerance and understanding as well as informed belief and commitment. Harper was also motivated by his own passions as a biblical scholar for sharing new insights from modern scientific biblical studies with lay Christians. Harper and other early REA leaders held the conviction that education in communities of faith and other religious associations can and should have rigor and integrity equal to that of education in the schools. He envisioned an organization that would support the advancement of high quality religious and biblical education in a spectrum of contexts, through coordination of existing efforts as well as sponsorship of new initiatives. His talk at the opening convention consisted of twenty propositions relating to the scope and purpose of the new organization.

John Dewey also spoke at the first convention. His address made clear his view that modern religious education must take heed of principles of growth and development emerging in psychological research, and thereby “approach the subject of religious instruction in the reverent spirit of science” (1906, 66). Dewey named recent initial

¹ Papers and addresses from the 1903 convention are published in *The Religious Education Association: Proceedings of the first convention, Chicago 1903*. Chicago, 1906.

findings in psychological research and challenged constituents to mobilize co-operative studies in this area to flesh out practical implications for religious instruction and learning. He expressed the optimism of the convention in his claim that this “would mark the dawn of a new day in religious education” (Ibid).

Also now available on the REA website is an address by Harrison Elliot given in 1950 upon his retiring from Union Theological Seminary and becoming General Secretary of the REA. Elliot held this position in the REA for a relatively brief period of time, but was influential in the field in the middle of the 20th century. His address provides concise and insightful reflection on the field at mid-century via an examination of developments over the first half of the century in understandings of the terms “religious,” “education,” and “religious education” (Elliot 1950).

As the REA commemorates its 100th year as an organization, this issue of the journal reflects on that 100-year history of the REA and the field of religious education. Helen Archibald’s lead article examines the cultural milieu and some of the prominent participants in the founding of the REA. Allen Moore takes a critical historical perspective on the role the REA and this journal have played in relation to the wider field, exposing in the process some notable shortcomings and biases. While the field and the REA has been undeniably male dominated, it is also undeniable that the work of Sophia Lyons Fahs (whose productive career spanned the entire first three-quarters of the century) contributed significantly to the shape of religious education over the past 100 years. Lucinda Nolan recaps that career for us, highlighting Fahs’s involvements with the REA and posing challenges for the future of the field based on Fahs’s own expressed hopes.

The REA has been predominately Christian in its representation, and heavily mainline Protestant in its beginnings. A fuller examination of the field over the past century requires attention to other parts of the picture. Kevin Lawson describes developments in evangelical Christian education across the century. While some evangelical Christians have at times worked in harmony with the REA, Lawson documents a history and a literature that is distinctively evangelical Christian. Another important part of the story of religious education in the 20th century that overlaps only partly with the REA is that of Jewish education. Hanan Alexander provides a schema for understanding trends in Jewish educational approaches over the past century, as well as the beginnings of a constructive proposal for re-conceiving Jewish education into the future.

In the Forum section four authors reflect in more personal ways on the REA and the field at this centennial marker and /or on influences from historical and contemporary scholarship that have shaped their work and aspirations as scholars in religious education. While these essays—by Dorothy Bass, Gabriel Moran, Thomas Groome, and Lynn Westfield—give voice to these persons’ unique stories and perspectives, together they expose something of the contemporary richness of our field, made more fertile by the faithful efforts of countless others across the past century.

It is my hope that the historical perspectives and personal reflections of these articles and essays may inspire us to think in informed, critical, and personally engaged ways as we look toward the future of the REA and the field of religious education.

Theodore Brelsford
Editor

Reference

- Dewey, J. 1906. "Religious education as conditioned by modern psychology and pedagogy," *The Religious Education Association: Proceedings of the first convention, Chicago 1903.* (60-66).
- Elliot. H. S. 1950. "Reflections of a religious educator," *Religious Education*, XLV: 4, (195-202).