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REA 2015 Annual Meeting, November 6-8

The Unresolved Battle Over Revelation in American Protestantism

Abstract

The unresolved battle over revelation in American Protestantism crystalizes in the debate between Harrison Elliott and James Smart in the 1940s and 1950s. This paper engages the arguments of Elliott in his book, Can Religious Education Be Christian? and Smart's The Teaching Ministry of the Church concerning their views on scripture and revelation. Their ideas of revelation are brought into conversation with religious educator Gabriel Moran. Moran imagines an alternative understanding of revelation that offers a fundamental critique to both Elliott and Smart. This alternative understanding creates opportunities for reshaping a solution to this conflict through the creative tensions and connectivity of teaching/learning. The implications for inter-religious, theological and church education are profound.

Introduction

The conflict concerning revelation has a deep impact in American Protestantism. The work of Harrison Elliott and James Smart from the 1940s and 1950s exemplifies the nature of the divide. The conflict is shaped by different understandings of revelation but also by revelation's relationship to education. This paper places revelation in an educational, rather than a theological framework in order to better understand how the relationship between revelation and education shapes the debate. In today's pluralistic world, even among Christians, it is difficult to find common ground to converse across diverse meanings of revelations and sacred texts. The focus of the paper centers on an educational question of how we might teach, learn and preach about revelation more effectively and across barriers that normally divide religious communities.

In 1940, Harrison Elliott, published a book titled Can Religious Education Be Christian? His argument is a seminal work on the relationship between progressive education and liberal theology. While Elliott answered the question of his title in the affirmative, in many ways his book was the last stand of liberal theology in religious education. Neo-orthodoxy became the dominant theological view in American Protestantism, particularly in the works of H. Shelton Smith and James Smart. Smart was instrumental in writing Christian Faith and Life Curriculum for the Presbyterian Church. Smart's book The Teaching Ministry of the Church suggested a religious education that could only be exclusively Christian.

While both Smart and Elliott embrace historical critical methods of interpreting the Bible, they have very different ideas about the foundational relationship between revelation and education. This contrast heightened the pitch of the debate in their time and created a fissure in church education and religious education at large that has never been bridged, despite many valiant efforts.

An alternative meaning of revelation, as proposed by Gabriel Moran, suggests possibilities for creating connective pedagogies for inter-religious and intra-religious learning today. The implications of the work of Elliott and Smart offer important creative insights into

the educational and theological landscape today that can help religious educators imagine a relationship between revelation and education as one that unites rather than divides.

Harrison Elliott

Born in Ohio in 1882, Harrison Elliott had the heart of an educator. He trained as a public school teacher, but he soon flourished in his own graduate study at Union Theological Seminary and Teacher's College in New York City (Cram, 2014, 1). He had a lifelong interest in psychology and group process that was the foundation for his work. Elliott was already a prominent faculty member at Union Theological Seminary when he completed his doctoral work at Yale and published Can Religious Education be Christian? in 1940.

This book was a firm and passionate articulation of the aging liberal movement's idea of educational process and its relationship to revelation. Elliott critiqued neo-orthodoxy, while reshaping the powerful dynamic between revelation and education in a new way. A more Christianized religious education evolving out of neo-orthodox theology would soon pervade the religious education movement. Reconsideration of Elliott's articulation of the relationship between education and revelation holds potential for the current reshaping of religious education.

The religious education movement which began in 1903 strongly embraced both theology and education. Each had to be held in tension without giving emphasis to one over the other. The emergence of the social sciences in the conversation, especially education, began to challenge the purpose of the methodology that was encountered in religious education. Of equal importance, Enlightenment thinking would value the authority of reason and the human experience. Religious education began working within an educative framework which challenged the status quo of teaching for a particular purpose. Sunday schools were built around Herbartian methods that began with the anticipated outcome and built aims toward that outcome (Elliott, 1940, 39). Educators like Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey were significant for the religious education movement. Their methods, which developed into a more child-centered and experience based method of education (Elliott, 1940, 41), expressed a parallel to liberal theology's understanding of various expressions of Christianity throughout history (Elliott, 1940, 67).

Critics of the religious education movement suggested that education had been given too dominant a role. The human suffering and evil that manifested itself in World War I created a moment which demanded a theological response. Neo-orthodoxy arose and gained importance as political and economic trends moved Europe and the United States toward World War II. By the 1930s, the Democratic ideals of the Enlightenment that shaped the Religious Education Association were being challenged to consider more fully the role of theology. Liberal theology was considered vague and humanistic, and there was a sense in which people were calling for a theology that addressed human sinfulness more fully. Bower put it succinctly, when he suggested that religious education needed to articulate a theology "without theologizing our movement" (in Schmidt, 1983, 118). This articulation was a task which would prove to be immensely challenging.

For Elliott, the process of religious education can be Christian, but it need not be exclusively so. Elliott's understanding of religious education is deeply tied to his meaning of revelation. God is revealed through the educational process for Elliott. The issue is not just revelation but how revelation becomes known, so he asserts "both revelation and the interpretation are direct acts of God" (1940, 115). Revelation in this framework is shaped by

human experience in the world, and yet is anchored in history and the stories of those experiences through time, leading not to one authoritative revelation but a reshaping of revelation through time and the educational process. Because the Christian identity is constantly progressing toward a “fullness of meaning” (1940, 311), he cannot perceive a way that education and revelation are not linked to their particular cultural situation (1940, 307). Neither education nor revelation is a singular or one-time experience, process or method.

Elliott connected his understanding of education with Christianity’s inclusive and unique formation of various expressions of faith, including the creative jolt experienced in the Reformation. In this way, authority, history, and experience work in tandem in Elliott’s understanding of religious education. These various aspects molded together allow for education and revelation to have a dynamic and dependent relationship. Elliott’s religious education can be Christian but it cannot be Christianized. For him, “a true educational process is denied as soon as education is made the servant of any dogmatism, whether in religion or any other area” (1940, 318-319). Elliott’s argument is that education and revelation must continually reshape each other in a dynamic relationship.

Life and Times of James Smart

James Smart was born in Ontario, Canada in 1906. Smart found his passion in the study of the Old Testament and he went to Germany for post-graduate study. Upon returning to North America, Smart pastored a number of congregations in Canada for over a decade, during which time he published a book titled What Man Can Believe (Atkinson, 2014, 1).

It was this book that attracted the attention of the Presbyterian curriculum development team in the United States who were creating a new Presbyterian curriculum titled, *Christian Life and Faith: A Program for Church and Home*. At that time, the higher criticism of biblical study was still struggling for credibility, at least among lay people in congregations and in Sunday School. Liberal theology’s shortcomings around social issues and authority of God were coming under more scrutiny. *Christian Life and Faith* attempted to address both of these issues, by embracing higher criticism of the Bible, and by shifting the theological foundations of the curriculum toward neo-orthodoxy’s core values. This shift emphasized God’s transcendence, human sinfulness, and equated scripture with revelation.

Smart’s curriculum work in the 1940s led him back to pastoral ministry with a particular focus on the role of the church in Christian education. In his book, The Teaching Ministry of the Church, Smart presents his theological framework for the importance of scripture and revelation in the role of the church. His understanding of revelation and scripture is dynamic. He writes, “revelation and response belong together and are inseparable because it is never an abstract truth about God or man that is revealed but rather, God himself in relation to man and man in relation with God” (1964, 13). The necessity and activity of the reader and the reader’s response is both how Smart pulls revelation through time and how he embraces historical criticism so fully. He equates the whole meaning of revelation with biblical revelation. Although Smart understands revelation as having a present reality, it is a present reality that cannot have shape beyond the confines of scripture.

Smart felt that the field of education had been "invaded" by humanism, in particular, by the educational methods of John Dewey (1954, 188). He felt education had become a product of the culture, a culture which he felt was distinctively not Christian (1954, 194). Smart was

troubled by this difference and separation, largely because he understood the role of the church as specifically linked to revelation. For Smart, "the church is the human instrument called into being by God's revelation of himself in his Word." In this way "the revelation of God creates the church" (1954, 24- 25).

Inasmuch as the Religious Education movement was impacted by H. Shelton Smith's argument in his book Faith and Nurture, that religious education must consider neo-orthodox theology, Smart translated neo-orthodox theology into church life and curriculum design with vigor. Smart's understanding of religious education needing theology in a more significant way was also embraced by many. Christian Education became the new rubric for the field. Smart's contribution to the conversations about the role of the church, the place of scripture and revelation were deeply significant for the trajectory of the re-directed Christian education movement. It was the tipping point for the movement to go in another direction. Some would claim it has not recovered from this road taken to this day.

Transforming the Relationship between Revelation and Education

Elliot and Smart both center their arguments on the relationship between revelation and education. For Smart, revelation is equated with scriptures and education relates to church as a tool or method for responding to revelation. For Elliott, revelation and education form a dynamic dialogue whereby human experience and a variety of expression of Christian traditions through history encourage participation in all generations in the present understanding of revelation. The foundations and structure of their thinking could not be more different. Yet Elliott and Smart represent significant voices in the religious and Christian education movements, respectively. They also represent voices in their respective movements that mark a divide that if bridged, could offer significant impact on the current work of religious and Christian education. An educational process/practice gives this conflict a potentially different perspective and encourages possible ways to bridge the divide; that process/practice can be found in the work of religious educator Gabriel Moran.

Gabriel Moran's influence in the field of religious education has been deep and wide in his writings, especially his attention to educational forms, teaching and listening. For Moran, revelation is religious experience: "at the heart of each tradition is the act of believing in God who reveals" (2009, 107). It is the religious dimension of human experience.

In his book, Both Sides: The Story of Revelation, Moran argues for a meaning of revelation as "a present relation" (2002, 11). The relational aspect of revelation is vital. Moran notes that the metaphor of call and response is the dominant metaphor for conceptualizing the divine human relationship. God reveals God's self and people respond. Faith traditions are formed around the "act of believing in a God who reveals" (Moran, 2009, 107). Revelation is the religious dimension of human experience. It comes at the depths of our deepest human experience and in all our relations.

Moran's idea of revelation is also rooted deeply in an understanding of time. Revelation is not "*also* in the present," revelation is *only* in the present. He suggests that what is needed for a deeper and richer understanding of revelation is a reshaping of our understanding of time. In Moran's image, the present is not a point with past points to its left and future points to its right; but in fact, "the present is not a point, nor does the present exclude the past" (2002, 12). This image of revelation as present is relational, and it also acknowledges the "powerful influence" of

the past on the present, without allowing the present to be swallowed up in the past (Moran, 2002, 12). The future is the openings and possibilities in the present.

Moran's idea of revelation understands the Bible as a possible source of revelation, but not as container for revelation. The Bible is a record of revelatory experiences; the revelatory potential of the Bible is dependent on the response of those who are hearing its words in the present.

While concepts of revelation and education may vary, a potential link for healthy dialogue resides in the articulation of the diversity of understandings in both revelation and educational process. Revelation and education have a dynamic relationship. It not necessary to agree on exactly how that relationship is shaped. In recognizing how that relationship is molded for ourselves and others, we can learn from various theological discourse and pedagogical practices what the strengths and weaknesses of each are.

Conclusion

Historically, the debate between Elliott and Smart's schools of thought was heated and divisive. If Elliott's book Can Religious Education Be Christian? critiqued neo-orthodoxy's influence on Religious Education, Shelden H. Smith's Faith and Nurture was a bitter counter-attack on liberal theology and progressive education. Smart's writing The Teaching Ministry of the Church, almost a decade later, furthers the voice of neo-orthodoxy and connects it even more deeply to the church and the Christian Education movement. He is reshaping the religious education movement to be exclusively Christian and to limit the role of education to teaching as telling what one should believe.

Moran's understanding of revelation and education afford us a window through which a deeper and significant conversation about revelation can happen. Moran suggests an understanding of the relationship between revelation and education that embraces pluralistic viewpoints and allows for a role for history that is neither superior nor inferior. The concept of revelation being present and recognizing that it has always been so, recasts dialogue with other traditions, especially Judaism and Islam. The Bible can hold a vital role in Christian tradition and in dialogue with other traditions, but that role need not be exclusive or authoritarian.

Moran's understanding of revelation is that it fully embraces its pedagogical process and allows for discourse between those who hold a variety of positions about revelation and education, even as contrasting as Elliott and Smart. The discourse is not to persuade the other but to distinguish in order to relate. In this way, a variety of expressions of revelation can be involved in the conversation. But the heart of the discourse is the present time pointing toward the mystery of revelation: the openness that a relational and present understanding of revelation is worth exploring, among Christians with differing understandings of revelation and within different faith traditions.

Further, exploration is needed around the similarities of today's late modern views on historical criticism of the Bible. Educational theories have also developed rapidly in recent decades and those methods warrant discussion with their theological counterparts in order to consider how the meaning of revelation impacts everything in the life-long and life-wide learning. Elliott and Smart both offer important starting points to understanding the tensions in the debate. They remind religious educators that the debate over revelation is not one reserved for philosophers and theologians, but for educators, religious educators, Biblical scholars,

historians, artists, and any persons who want to create deeper and richer relation among each other and with the divine. Exploring and distinguishing core concepts of revelation and education helps us consider how religious education might approach both revelation and education in new ways in today's pluralistic world.

However, as this study has sought to show if the unresolved battle over revelation in American Protestantism is to be resolved, our exploration of the relationship between revelation and education should include Elliott and Smart at the table, with Moran as a vital conversation partner, as we are lured to a diversity of understandings of revelation and education.

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