

“An Evaluation of the Contribution of John H. Westerhoff III to Religious Education”  
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This paper will explore John Westerhoff’s model of *Community of Faith Enculturation* and attempt to show the lasting impact it has had on religious education.

### **Westerhoff’s background**

Westerhoff was born in 1933 to a nominally Christian family in Patterson, New Jersey. He earned a Masters of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School (1958) and an Ed.D. in the foundations of education from Columbia University (1974). His dissertation topic was the hidden curriculum in the work of William Holms McGuffey (1800-1873) and the McGuffey readers. He served local congregations as a United Church of Christ (UCC) minister (1958-1967) and later became an Episcopal priest (1974-present). He was also the founding editor of the United Church of Christ educational journal, *Colloquy* (1967-1974), was a professor of religious education at Duke Divinity School (1975-1993), served as the editor of *Religious Education* (1978-1987), and later in his career as Theologian in Residence for a large Episcopal parish. His work strongly reflects the influences of John Dewey, Ivan Illich, C. Ellis Nelson, Paul Tillich, and the publication of the *General Catechetical Directory* of the Roman Catholic Church (1971). He described his theological position as having been shaped by what he called a “neo-liberal-liberation-hope theology” (1974, 19). His early writings served primarily as a critique of the then dominant schooling model of education and his most influential text, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (1976b, rev. 2000) defined his alternative model, one he called a Community of Faith Enculturation.

A systematic analysis of the development of Westerhoff’s thinking is a challenging task. His writings did not follow a set pattern of development and his books were written for a general audience. He never saw himself as someone who sought to develop an educational system. In his words; “I wrote books like painters paint paintings. I began with some specific issue, question, or problem. I tried to resolve it through lectures and the responses people made to them. I then wrote the book and sent it off to a publisher. I have rarely read one of them, mainly because I was drawn to something new to explore” (2000, xiii). Additionally, throughout his career, he saw himself as a priest more than as an academic. He worked in a church while on the faculty at Duke and his last several books were meant for use in Episcopal parishes.

### **Community of Faith Enculturation**

Westerhoff’s early work focused on a critique of the schooling model of education. He saw education best occurring in a defined ecology of home, school, community, church, extended family, etc. The schooling model as advocated for in the work of Dewey (1916), with its emphasis on professionalization, drove out the informal ways in which education took place and limited it primarily to the school. Westerhoff saw this as a broken ecology and that fixing it was not a matter of improving teacher training or the curriculum, but rather the model itself was the problem and the classroom had become a teaching ghetto (1970, 54). A full proposal to replace the schooling model came in 1976 with the publication of *Will Our Children Have Faith?* It

defined the “Community of Faith Enculturation” model for religious education and Westerhoff believes that all of his other writing served as either preparation for or commentary on this text (2000, xiii). There are a number of key themes contained in this model.

1. Enculturation. For Westerhoff, a Religious Socialization model seeks to pass the normative values and culture on to children. An Enculturation model, in contrast, asks how adults can best be Christian with children (1980a, 29). In a socialization model, children are seen as passive receivers of the values, ideals, and goals of the culture. In an enculturation model, they not only receive the culture, but they also participate in shaping, critiquing, and improving it. In his words:

Enculturation emphasizes the process of interaction between and among persons of all ages. It focuses on the interactive experiences and environments within which persons act to acquire, sustain, change, and transmit their understandings and ways. In enculturation one person is not understood as the actor and another the acted upon, but rather both act, both interact, and both react (1976b, 80).

2. Catechesis. Westerhoff worked hard to re-introduce the use of the term catechesis beyond the Roman Catholic context of the term. He felt that the “archaic” character of the term would distance it from the fads of the day and place it in the deeper streams of historical practice. He defined catechesis as, “those pastoral activities that aid persons to understand the liturgical requirements of the Christian life and to prepare for conscious, active, genuine, participation in the church’s liturgical life” (1980b, 17). He argued that ritual needed to be at the very center of Christian Education because the community’s story was told through its liturgy: “in worship we remember and we act in symbolic ways which bring our sacred tradition and our lives together, providing us with both meaning and motivation for daily existence. That is why, if our children are to have faith, they must worship with us” (2000, 58). Westerhoff defined seven characteristics of catechesis (2004, 80ff):

1. Catechesis is comprised of two interrelated processes: formation and education.
2. Catechesis always includes both converting and nurturing dimensions. It also includes Orthopraxis (right behavior), orthodoxy (right belief), *lex orandi* (the rule of worship), and *lex Credendi* (the rule of belief)
3. The processes of catechesis are understood best in terms of a circle of experience, reflection, and action.
4. The processes of catechesis are related to readiness rather than time, to appropriateness rather than packaged formats.
5. The end of catechesis is a lifestyle, which includes our total being as thinking, feeling, willing persons.
6. Catechesis is a personal pilgrimage with companions in community.
7. Catechesis particularly relates to the liturgical life of the church.

It is interesting to note that this shift is consistent with his own personal change from the U.C.C. to the Episcopal Church where the emphasis is on the principle that the theology is lived out in the liturgy. In Anglicanism, *The Book of Common Prayer* is seen as the embodiment of systematic theology. The wording and placement of various services, as well as the rubrics that

govern how they are to be performed, all carry theological significance and contribute to defining the particularities of Anglicanism.

3. The church as an educational community. Deeply influenced by the publication of the *General Catechetical Directory* by the Roman Catholic Church in 1971, Westerhoff echoed its call for the reassertion of the local church as a community of love as well as the new emphasis on the laity in the daily life of the Church. He argued that education is not just about teaching doctrines, moral principles, and Scripture passages; but that it should rather focus on the life and work of the local parish (1974, 30). This is learned through the countless shared experiences of parish life; time shared with a person at a potluck dinner can have as great an impact on a person's life as a major discovery in a Bible study class.

4. Community. Influenced by the work of anthropologist Margaret Mead, Westerhoff believed that the basic human unit is more of a "tribal family" (1983b, 257) than a nuclear one. He advocated for a more tribal basis to address the reality that many of the functions of life that were once taken care of by families have been taken over by society and that the family had gone from being an independent unit of production to a social unit of consumption. He wrote:

Nurture is increasingly conducted in nurseries, day care centers, schools, and through the mass media. Security is provided by insurance companies, retirement centers, fire and police departments, and hospitals. Cooperation on survival needs for food, clothing, and shelter and a necessary division of labor have been assumed by business and industry. Support, while still centered in the family, is increasingly supplied by clubs, voluntary associations, professional therapists and counselors (1983b, 258).

Westerhoff called for the Church to become the fundamental social unit of society because only then could families and social institutions work together effectively. This would require transitioning from the existing *gesellschaft* structure of churches (focused on formal and impersonal relationships) to more of a *gemeinschaft* community (one that has a common memory, common vision, a common authority, and common rituals). He later described this in terms of the Church serving as a *mid-community* that exists between the family and society (2004, 9).

5. Brining nurture and conversion together. Westerhoff saw the limit of nurture as being only the ability to nurture people into an institutional religion. It was insufficient on its own to bring people to a mature Christian faith. He concluded conversion was also essential if maturity were to be reached and he described conversion as the turning from a religion that is given through nurture to a faith that is owned through conversion (1976a, 21-22; see also 2000, 21 and 2005a, 53). This requires critical reflection and the ability to question, critique, and change the values and practices of the religion one is appropriating.

6. The metaphor of pilgrimage. The failure of most curriculum was that it was usually seen in Classist (John Locke and David Hume and the metaphor of production and assembly line) or Romanticist (Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the metaphor of growth) metaphors. Westerhoff instead focused on the metaphor of pilgrimage and emphasized both the

relational emphasis of a journey shared with others and the value of each step taken on the journey. The use of this metaphor also allows for the Holy Spirit to participate in the spiritual life of the individual and to choose the destination of the pilgrimage.

7. The role of practical theology. In thinking through the challenges facing the education of clergy, Westerhoff saw that post-Schleiermacher breakdown of practical theology into narrowly defined subspecialties contributed to the problem of the compartmentalization of education. Additionally, he argued, they became secularized because they lost their connection with each other and with theological reflection. Westerhoff advocated for the reestablishment of practical theology as an academic discipline because it would train clergy to think in a more holistic manner. He wrote, “It is my contention that, until we can reestablish the field of practical theology and equip both the laity and the clergy to engage in this integrating enterprise, the church will be devoid of an adequate means for being a responsive and responsible community” (1983a, 12). In a 2005 article in *Religious Education*, he described practical theology as being made up of six dimensions: “liturgics (worship, including homiletics), ethics, spirituality, pastoral care, catechetics (formation, education, and instruction), and ecumenics (stewardship, evangelism, and the church’s relationship with society)” (2005b, 349).

## **Lasting Impact**

Westerhoff’s enculturation model recognizes the value of a community’s unique heritage and it also recognizes the educational significance of the many and varied events of each passing day. This model has been dismissed by some (Nicholson, 1981, 306; Groome 1991, 194; etc.) as a basic socialization model, which is inaccurate and unfair. Westerhoff recognized that socialization is only able to perpetuate the status quo in a community. He chose the term enculturation because it adds the dimension of critical reflection to its structure (Westerhoff and Eusden 1982, 119; Westerhoff, 1987, 581; 2004, 80ff; etc.). This is reflected in his emphasis on the role of conversion helping an individual go from perpetuating an inherited religion to owning their faith. It is also shown in his own shift to Anglicanism and its self-identity as a *via media*, which strives to maintain the respect for tradition that Roman Catholicism cherishes with the desire for reform as reflected in Protestantism. Without a spirit of critical reflection and the willingness to change long held traditions that have been proven wrong or inadequate, these positions would make little sense.

This model also serves as an important reminder that education is not just about utilizing a particular curriculum, or ensuring that critical reflection in a community follows a particular formula. It is full of intangible and random events. It is not just taught in the classroom, but lived in the midst of the community in ways that are not even fully quantifiable. Westerhoff is unique in capturing the subtlety of this and in incorporating the importance of community life in an educational model. His understanding of practical theology focused on the training of clergy to implement the Community of Faith Enculturation model and to assist them in developing both a holistic and critical approach to theological reflection that would then be used in the parishes they served.

Westerhoff also modeled a process of dialectical thinking. This approach has been popular among neo-Orthodox theologians (i.e. Barth, Brunner) and tries to negate an either/or approach to differing views and seeks to maintain the tension between both. We see this in Westerhoff's work in his efforts to maintain the tension between the Catholic-Protestant, Liberal-Neo-Orthodox, and Nurture-Conversion divides. It is broad approach and rejects the either-or dualisms that do little more than create false dichotomies. For Westerhoff, heresy is defined by holding one view to the exclusion of other possibilities (2000, ix). He sought to overcome the false dualisms of either/or positions. He saw this theologically in the arguments between Catholics and Protestants and he saw it in religious education in the arguments between the roles of conversion and nurture.

It can be argued that *Will Our Children Have Faith?* was more about training adults than it was about the education of children. For Westerhoff, religious education is not just about teaching children facts and figures, it was about the whole community (including at least three generations) learning to become Christian together. He wrote, "Until we have converted grown-up adults living faithfully in a community of faith which expresses in every aspect of its corporate life the tradition it professes, neither the transformation nor the formation of children in Christian faith will be possible" (1970, viii).

There are weaknesses to this model. Westerhoff's writings assume a homogenous (in his case, a politically and theologically liberal) community. This raises interesting questions about the nature of community in his Community of Faith Enculturation model. In assuming a homogenous community, he does not factor in the possibility of multi-ethnic, politically and theologically diverse communities, which would not be able to cohere around a single narrative. He addresses the need for a community to be multi-generational, but this is so that the story of the community can be maintained; but it is assumed that a single story is the one passed down. This seems neither practical in a diverse, multicultural society, nor healthy given the need for improved dialogue to diffuse the political and social polarization rampant in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-first century churches.

The changes facing society in the early Twenty-first Century also offer severe challenges to the enculturation model. Fragmentation of communities and families, as well as a level of mobility that sees families moving on average once every seven years, mean the opportunities for a cohesive community to transmit its heritage between generations is greatly reduced. The enculturation model presupposes that a significant amount of time is spent participating in the life of a community. In it, the parish is seen not just as a place of worship on Sunday, but a place for educational programs, social gatherings, and community service. It is a place where significant relationships develop over the course of years. In a culture where the work week goes far longer than forty hours and where children participate in structured recreational activity, community life becomes a series of discrete moments that occur in unrelated activities. For example, instead of Wednesday night being spent in a mid-week worship service followed by classes and social activities, a typical Wednesday is more likely to be spent bringing multiple children to different afternoon activities where the structured program affords little or no time for children or parents to develop or deepen relationships with other participants.

## Conclusion

The Community of Faith Enculturation model still needs development to meet the needs of the Twenty-first century. Given the growing chasm between the value systems of practicing Christians and the surrounding culture, the benefits of a cohesive community are particularly useful in helping people identify with a community that is more and more countercultural. How this can be done without becoming merely sectarian is worth exploring.

It is also worth exploring how to help people maintain a connection to parish life in the midst of a compartmentalized and fragmented world. Do email devotionals, Facebook posts, and Youtube videos of sermons help to bring people closer together, or do they inadvertently only contribute to the sense of isolation that the internet generation appears to be lost in?

Westerhoff's model is both simple and comprehensive. It honors the ways in which even the smallest moments of community life can contain educational significance, but it also calls for critical self-reflection on the part of the community regarding its values, its behaviors, and its priorities. It is an avenue of thought that is worth further exploration and development.

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