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## STILL TO COME

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The hundredth anniversary of any organization's founding is an occasion for celebration. At the least, one can celebrate the organization's longevity in surviving for a whole century. The organization has to be doing something right to exist that long. The Religious Education Association has done many good things in its hundred years of existence. These things should be remembered and praised.

This anniversary is also a time for asking why the REA has not been as successful as its founders would have expected. Even those of us who have ardently supported the cause of the REA have to admit that the Association has not flourished. I will argue that its weaknesses have been inextricably tied to its great hopes and ambitions. A candid assessment of that history and how the weaknesses can be lessened, if not eliminated, are needed if the best days of the REA are still to come.

In the 1970s I often said that the REA was founded about a century too early. I would then speculate that 2003 might be a good time to begin the work which the REA set out to accomplish in 1903. I was right about the great need for the work of the REA in 2003. I misjudged, however, that the need would be widely recognized as early as 2003.

## THE PAST

If future success is ever to arrive, it will involve understanding what has limited the REA from its inception. One could point to many factors, not the least of which is economics. I will concentrate on the idea of "religious" in religious education. More particularly, I will examine the ideas of religion/religious in the thinking of the keynote speaker at the founding of the REA, namely, John Dewey (1903, 60–66).

The national climate of opinion when the REA was founded provided both possibility and weakness for understanding religion. The period from 1890 to 1914 is called the progressive era, a heady time in the United States, Canada, Australia and Western Europe (Rodgers 1998). It is probably safe to say that had there not been a progressive era, there would not have been a founding of the REA. The REA could not have begun twenty years earlier or twenty years later.

As is true of the names of many movements, "progressive" carried a wide range of meanings. Almost everyone in public life was in favor of progress, but the assumptions of what constituted progress were at times contradictory. Religion and morality were unavoidably a part of the mix (Durkheim 1961). Some European intellectuals assumed that religion would soon disappear, but that assumption never took root in the United States. The issue was how to include religion in the ambitious reform programs that were sweeping the United States in the first decade of the century.

John Dewey, who was born the year of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and died during the McCarthy era (1952), offers a microcosm of religious changes in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Dewey is deservedly called the greatest philosopher that the United States has ever produced. He is most famous for how his philosophy influenced education but he was also involved in every aspect of public life throughout his long career.

Dewey's early upbringing was within a strict Congregationalist family. His mother's main concern was that her son be "right with Jesus" (Westbrook 1991, 3). His philosophy professors at the University of Vermont were graduates of Union Theological Seminary; philosophy and theology were not kept in separate compartments. The philosophy that Dewey espoused in the 1880s was a Christian Hegelianism, an idealistic search for the organic unity of all things. Dewey would later repudiate this religious idealism, although he admitted in an autobiographical essay that it had left a permanent effect on his thinking (Dewey 1981b, 147-160).

A major change occurred in Dewey's thinking during the 1890s. Due in large part to his wife Alice, whom he had married in 1886, John Dewey became very critical of the Christian church.<sup>1</sup> In an 1893

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 36: "Dewey acquired from her the belief that a deeply religious attitude was indigenous in natural experience, and that theology and ecclesiastical institutions had benumbed rather than promoted it."

essay, Dewey proposed that the mission of the church was to go out of existence.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of his life, Dewey was in search of the religious while distancing himself from every religious institution. He thought the public school was much more religious than the Christian church (1981a, 147–160).

I find it amazing that the organizers of the first meeting of the REA should have invited John Dewey to be the keynote speaker. They surely knew the view he held of the church by 1903. It also surprises me that Dewey agreed to give the talk. Although most of the organizers were committed Christians, they had enough distance from the church that they could credibly invite Dewey and that Dewey would accept. But here is where the strength and the weakness of the meaning of “religious” is evident both for Dewey and the REA. How far can one separate the religious from actual religious bodies? Can an organization dedicated to education in religious matters leave behind traditional forms of religion?<sup>3</sup> Dewey went further than George Albert Coe, the intellectual genius of the early REA. But Coe was influenced by Dewey and the tide of progressive thinking at the turn of the century.

Dewey’s most extensive treatment of religion is in his brief book, *Common Faith*, published in 1930. This book is not anti-church but it is condescending in instructing church leaders how the church should fit into society. His treatment of the origin of “religion” is surprisingly shallow (Dewey 1934, 43). He wished to separate the adjective “religious” from the noun “religion (Dewey 1934, 28).”<sup>4</sup> A distinction in the connotations of the two terms is helpful but the attempt at total separation seems quixotic. J.H. Randall, a colleague and friendly critic, offered the best assessment of Dewey’s view of religion: “For him art is the gateway to appreciating alien cultures, and his prescription is both catholic and discriminating. But religion must reject the past for the best in the present; and here his sympathies are both protestant

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, “Christianity and Democracy,” *Early Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 4:10. “The function of the church is to universalize itself and thus pass out of existence.”

<sup>3</sup> Corliss Lamont, “John Dewey Capitulates to God,” *New Masses*, July 31, 1934, 23: “It is as if someone renounced all existing forms of Fascism as evil, but claimed that the adjective “fascist” meant the true, the good and the beautiful.”

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, *Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934). “The opposition between religious values as I conceive them and religion is not to be bridged. Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religion must be dissolved.”

and unimaginative. Art is to be enjoyed wherever it is found excellent; religion is not to be enjoyed but to be emancipated from historic encumbrances the better to foster intelligent humanism." (Randall 1936, 110).

In some ways, Dewey's search for a religious unity free of the conflicts of religion embodies the best and the worst of United States culture in the twentieth century. Catholics, Protestants and Jews have been able to find a meeting place under the umbrella of "religious." The United States of the past century has been able to avoid most of the religion conflicts that affect much of the world. The drawback is that "religious," standing by itself, tends to become an abstraction or generality. The more conservative or traditional branches of Jewish, Protestant and Catholic religions have never fully embraced an education described as "religious."

I think that these conservative branches of the three religions are avoiding a necessary dialogue with other religions and with secular culture. But the fault is not entirely on their side. The "liberal" view of religion has unfortunately set itself against "tradition." The result has been a fruitless conflict between liberal or progressive and conservative or traditional. When Dewey started writing on education in the 1890s, he had a defensible case that "traditional education" was his enemy (Greek and Latin for the upper class; mechanical recitations for the lower class). Fifty years later, Dewey and his followers were still pitting progressive against traditional, when it was difficult to find anything deserving the name "traditional."<sup>5</sup> And if education suffered from an opposition between progressive and traditional, religion suffered much worse.

The founders of the REA had no intention of driving away most Jews and Catholics, as well as the evangelical wing of Protestantism. But the liberal language imported from social science and politics could not do justice to any of the religious traditions. A revolt against liberalism in the 1930s should not have caused a crisis in the meaning of "religious education," but it did (Smith 1941).

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<sup>5</sup> In *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), Dewey says he would like to get rid of the term "progressive education" but he nonetheless continues to use it. He is actually very critical of "progressive schools" in this book but tries to correct their problems. He never attempts the same with "traditional schools." His chief protagonists, although never mentioned, are Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. Their "Great Books Curriculum" was not much of a danger to the public schools.

I have found great inspiration in the writing of George Albert Coe. He was always pressing the important questions and driving in the right direction. But his "liberal" language drove away many of the allies he would have needed to develop a profession and a discipline of religious education. Like Dewey, Coe discovered the limits of psychology, from the time of his and Dewey's unbounded enthusiasm at the turn of the century to their disillusionment in the 1930s. In a 1937 essay Coe sadly notes that "our whole culture is confused, and all education, whether secular or religious, reflects this confusion." The problem is, says Coe, that our psychology has not moved on to the dynamics "of nationalism, of war and peace, of economic conduct, of advertising and other forms of propaganda, of public opinion . . ." (Coe 1937, 5). He surely names the important issues of the day but a field of religious education had not matured enough to grapple effectively with any of these big issues.

There was a moment in the late 1960s when it seemed that the REA might be ready for a revitalization around the big issues of that time: race, poverty, war. But there was still lacking a coalescence of the needed forces to bring about the revolution that would be needed. The culture was not ready to face up to a serious engagement with education in religious matters. As for 2003, it is difficult to see signs of progress from either 1937 or 1967. However, there are signs that the United States is being forced to confront religions and ideologies that little concerned it in the past. The shake up of the last few years will profoundly affect the country for better or for worse in the next few decades.

### THE FUTURE

I wrote in 1981 that the Religious Education Association was similar to the United Nations flag (Moran 1981, 23). Both of them represented a hope for the future that cannot be abandoned even if their present powers are not up to the task. Twenty-two years later my comparison seems even more apt. During the interim the United Nations has emerged with at least greater possibilities. Since the collapse of the Cold War, the United Nations has become a more serious player in world politics. It still lacks the firepower of even a small-sized nation. It is mainly a place for talk but while countries are talking they are not shooting.

Religious communities, above all, should appreciate that power

does not ultimately depend on guns, money and the ability to dominate one's neighbor. Ultimate power lies in receptivity, the human ability to be increasingly open to new possibilities.<sup>6</sup> Even if the Religious Education Association were to have a great new burst of energy, it is unlikely that it could compete in numbers with the catechetical congress of a large Roman Catholic diocese or with a Sunday morning congregation in many southern evangelical churches. Its possible power lies elsewhere.

The REA from its beginning has had an international aspect. While based in the United States, it has usually shown, more than other U.S. organizations do, an appreciation of its Canadian members. In recent years there have been a few links to other countries in Europe and Asia, and to Australia. Religious education in the United States and Canada has been mainly a story of Christian and Jewish religions. No apologies are needed on that score; trying to get Catholics, Jews and Protestants to understand one another was already more than any one organization could manage. But in the last few years Islam has become the main challenge to whether we are ready for a field that would truly deserve the name of religious education.

An international Religious Education Association is needed to understand any of the major conflicts in the world. We need social scientists, political theorists and economists who have at least a rudimentary understanding of such religions as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, and Sikhism. We also need people deeply rooted in these traditions, as well as Jewish and Christian traditions, who engage in serious dialogue and cooperation. The Dewey form of religiosity is not up to the task of discussing the intricacies of Muslim or Christian doctrines.

The United Nations itself represents a kind of international REA in which the "religious" search for unity has been totally separated from existing, traditional religions. In its most heralded document, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the topic of religion was

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<sup>6</sup> The distinction is very often referred to by Joseph Nye's "hard power": and "soft power" which does not at all capture the paradox of power (*The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Jan Egeland is much more to the point in his comparison of the United States and Norway: *Impotent Superpower and Powerful Small State* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1989).

expressly avoided. Eleanor Roosevelt, who shepherded the document through the process of composition and approval, ruled out religion. After a few bitter disputes between two of the document's authors, P. C. Chang, a Buddhist and Charles Malik, a Lebanese Catholic, religion was judged to be too contentious. As a "declaration," the document was a kind of secular sermon which everyone (including the Soviet bloc) could assent to. The binding "covenant" was postponed (Glendon 2001).

The work of the covenant (or what became covenants) inevitably reintroduced religion, a subject which never simply disappears. The United Nations has repeatedly tried to deal with religion, starting with its 1959 survey of religious freedom in 82 countries. It has tried to uphold the rights of religious people to express their religion, although one group's expressions can be offensive to another group's beliefs. Here is where a religious education is needed to mediate disputes and try to achieve some degree of understanding (Lerner 2000).

I find it fascinating that the Covenant on Political and Civil Rights affirms a right to "moral and religious education" ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)). The fact that a United Nations document uses the term "religious education" is indicative that religious education is more a question of the future than the past. Unfortunately, moral and religious education is referred to as a right of parents. While parental rights regarding their children's morality and religion are certainly to be supported, the impression conveyed is that religious education (as well as moral education) is exclusively an element in parent-child relations. So long as the United Nations does not understand religious education as a lifelong task involving serious academic study, it is unlikely to comprehend the sort of conflict that regularly appears at the United Nations or the International Court.

Instead of just drawing an analogy between the United Nations and the Religious Education Association, I am making the outrageous sounding claim that the United Nations is already trying to be a religious education association and the Religious Education Association ought to be a united nations of religious inquiry. The idea of bringing together leading educational, political and religious thinkers to give a second birth to the Religious Education Association—an association with a more developed international mission than it had in 1903—

may currently be unimaginable. But nothing less than such an ambitious project will be adequate for this century.

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