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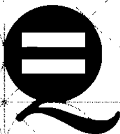

McKENZIE, Leon, and R. Michael HARTON, *The Religious Education of Adults* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2002), 275pp. Pbk. ISBN 1-57312-379-X. $24.

Leon McKenzie's book, *The Religious Education of Adults*, was published in 1982. At the time, it was considered a foundational work in the field. In the meantime, according to the new book cover, it has acquired the status of a classic. This revised version of the book, co-authored with R. Michael Harton, attempts to update and expand the original. It does this by incorporating some recent writings and research, and by expanding and adding a few chapters. Whereas the earlier work comprised of an introduction and seven chapters, this edition has ten chapters with an introduction. One of the new chapters is an elaboration of a theory of adult religious education based on McKenzie's later writings. The final two chapters replace the previous appendices with revised material on evaluation and curriculum and program models.

McKenzie and Harton are upfront with their thesis: adult religious education in most local churches is largely ineffectual (p. 1). Adults do not see parish/congregational education as a credible provider of quality education (p. ix). The thinking that controls the doing of adult religious education must be confronted and deconstructed. They propose to do this through the prism and principles of (secular) adult education. The intention of the book is to improve the practice of adult religious education. The authors make no claim to rare insight (p. 1), yet the text reads like the latest book of revelation offered to Christian churches.

McKenzie and Harton's new edition is unabashedly philosophical. They seek to probe the foundational issues undergirding the enterprise of adult education. Their proposal is a paradigm of the philosophical framework of adult education today. It is on this level and on those terms that I will briefly attempt to engage the book in this review.

McKenzie and Harton set up the problem by postulating a set of nine beliefs currently controlling the education of adults in our churches. They proceed to offer a set of eight counter beliefs to "solve" the problem (pp. 2–26). The conventional beliefs, the authors claim, expose five problem areas in church education. First, program

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content is determined exclusively by a priestly caste without any suggestions from the learners; second, programs focus almost solely on formation rather than critical education; third, they are fixated on theological content to the exclusion of all other adult concerns; fourth, programs are conducted by religious educators who are academically prepared in theology but minimally prepared in adult learning principles; and fifth, the programs are conceived in a research vacuum.

Churches, no doubt, suffer from poor educational practices. However, the set of conventional beliefs and problem areas postulated by the authors seem to set up a straw man for easy dismantling. Their counter proposal and "new perspectives" usher us into the enlightened world of adult education. In the limited space available, let me raise up three philosophical problems with McKenzie and Harton's text—and by implication with the contemporary adult education project.

First, adult education intentionally defines itself over against the child, the school and the teacher. This creates crude stereotypes of the "adult learner" and "the child learner" that are a disservice to both. It leads to conceptual and practical age segregation—with the child and adult simplistically opposed and locked into different worlds. From its earliest years, the adult education movement has grasped the inadequacy of equating education with teaching children in school. People of any age, it claims, can learn from a wide range of experiences. However, the tragic turn and flaw in much of the literature on adult education is its anti-schooling rhetoric (p. 166) and its stereotypical attacks on teaching (p. 182). Teaching is what adults do to children (pedagogy). Adults talk to one another with the help of a facilitator (andragogy).

Second, "The Post-Twentieth-Century Adult" is the title of McKenzie and Harton's third chapter. In their words, this adult is "protean" (p. 74), "beholders to no one for the values he espouses" (p. 87), "refuses to surrender to the tutelage of other" (p. 86), and "is secular, sophisticated, individual, and free" (p. 78). This adult is the product "of the central values that flourished in the eighteenth-century philosophical Enlightenment" (p. 76). I find it shocking that anyone could write such statements in 1982 and reiterate them in 2002, apparently oblivious to feminist, ecological and some psychological criticisms of this Promethean ideal. This modern ideal of becoming rational and independent still largely permeates the field of adult education literature. It is an ideal in crisis and out of touch with postmodern sensibilities.

Finally, McKenzie and Harton's conceptualization of adult education is reductionist. "The term," they claim, "should be applied only to programs in which an educator brings a degree of expertise to the task of structuring and facilitating learning" (p. 166–67). This is elitist and fosters a cult of professionalism. It does, however, enable us to understand the theoretical and philosophical moves taken by theorists of adult education which function to separate adult education off from the rest of education and underlie its claim to be unique.

Our churches need all the educational help they can get. However, they ought not to take over uncritically the literature and practices of the adult education movement and its modern secularist ideal of adulthood. Religious traditions have deep wisdom with regard to the meaning of education, teaching and the paradox of adulthood. The time has arrived for churches to retrieve that ancient wisdom and incorporate it into their educational life forms, processes and practices.

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