

Doctoral Thesis

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Does education have anything relation to theology? How does the educator's worldview commitments speak to his or her practice of education? James Michael Lee brought a definite answer to these questions -- a firm "No" to the relations question, and an advocacy for empirical findings over and against any speculative or theoretical positions in reply to the commitments question. Lee claimed to have a universal, neutral, metatheory for all religious education, a theory that would apply to all religious educators in any and every religion. But in proposing his theory he overlooked the way that empirical facts express worldviews. This book is a detective story, tracing commitments that lie underneath empirical "neutrality." In the process the reader will see avenues that unmistakably link education to theology. Education turns out to be a thoroughly worldview-conditioned process.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem of the relationship of theology to education within Christian/religious education.

Chapter 2 presents Lee's argument in its original post-Vatican II (post-1965) context, summarizing his proposal and defining his special terms.

Lee wants learners in religious education to personally experience religion. He wants an education that aims not for facts but for personally appropriated religion. Lee wants a religious education that places the accent on the modifier, "religious." Like educationists in the stream of Dewey, Lee's educational starting-point is epistemological -- how students gain knowledge. Hence Lee's key to better learning is an epistemology based on experience. Students by personal experience must acquire not just religious knowledge but "religion." Lee advocates religion laboratories, much like John Dewey's laboratory school.

Lee's way forward for religious education is orientation to specified goals. Lee wants instruction to be targeted to specified "behaviors." He advocates a taxonomy like that of Benjamin Bloom. Bloom and colleagues used psychological and other empirical findings to set teaching tasks in step-by-step order. Accordingly, Lee wishes a social science foundation for religious education. By "social science," I will show that Lee usually means "empirically observable".

For Lee, the problem of religious education is backwardness. Religious education has failed to attend to the science of teaching and learning. He confirms his perception by contrasting the other two "areas" of religious education. Instruction is sometimes set off from two other specialties in education departments. The other two, educational counseling and educational administration, long ago adopted scientific models, and professionalized. Religious instruction alone continues to lag.?

Lee traced religious education's weakness to faulty theory or methodology. Religious education practice should no longer be theologically based. Order of presentation is no longer to be

derived from, say, logical considerations of systematic theology. Lee sees that dogmatic formulations provide little guidance for educators seeking to improve practice. The absence of benchmarks retards evaluation, unlike the apparent situation in general education. Because theology's directives to religious educators are nonspecific, there is little guidance to stimulate innovation. Religious educators appropriate techniques without adequate theoretical reason.

Chapter 2 continues by profiling the theology that fuels Lee's perception of its limitation as foundation for religious education. Lee says explicitly that he is an immanentist. Lee's opening to secular instruction theory is possible because Lee perceives God to be at work everywhere, in all fields of knowledge and action. His understanding of God's revelation as an ongoing stream opens the way to an appropriation of Deweyan learning by experience.

Lee wants theology to retain a place in "product" contents but no place in the "process" contents. Theology should have no role in structuring the religious instruction act; that is to say, theology should have no role in methodology.

Chapter 2 closes with peer reactions. The response of peers has been muted, rarely detailed. The chapter analyzes responses for their methodological implications.

Chapter 3 profiles the theology-social science question. The issue of a foundation for theory and practice -- social science, theology, or a combination -- continues to be a significant issue in the religious education literature.

I show, first, that "social science" is more than one thing. Several variants of sociology exist, not just the empirical variant; other social sciences have similar variation. Lee's preferred social science attributes value-freedom to social science, and splits verifiable empirical "facts" from values, with values assigned to a theology. Lee denied the pejorative label of "positivist" but I will show that the label is appropriate. While Lee states an awareness of the interrelationship of observation and theory in making "facts," he does not go far with the awareness.

The period 1962 to 2000, the period of Lee's proposal, has seen development in social science methodology. The social sciences have moved beyond an empiricist understanding of fact. Broadly, Thomas S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962; second edition, 1970) undermined scientific claims to objective truth. N. R. Hanson earlier showed observation to be "theory laden." W. V. Quine's 1956 article critiquing "dogmas of empiricism" had also raised serious questions. In general, the post-1970 climate has been unfavorable to overarching frameworks.

New understandings of "social science" have become evident: several variants of "social science" have emerged. As far back as Ernst Troeltsch (1931), theologians recognized the inevitability of theological assumptions for, e.g., sociology. Since 1975, mainstream Christian theorists have cast doubt on empiricist "neutrality" in social science. I will draw upon some of these theorists, including Gregory Baum, Don Browning, and John Milbank, and relate them to Lee's proposal. Milbank, in particular, demonstrated that the possibility of social "sciences" was generated by unstated theological or metaphysical assumptions. Such theologians see neutrality as impossible and unnuanced empiricism as naïve. "Theology versus social science" in their

view becomes a false dichotomy. The possibility of social theorizing that is aware of its theological assumptions has emerged more clearly than before.

Lee presents his kind of social science as the only kind or a foundational kind that is fully compatible with other forms. In contrast to other types of social science where metaphysical and ethical aspects are acknowledged, however, Lee's social science is not frank about its metaphysical basis.

Chapter 4 portrays Lee's particular theology. Rather than being neutral, able to ride above varieties of theology-driven instruction, social science religious instruction is itself a product of a particular theological stance. Lee works from a theology that is unstated, as Françoise Darcy-Bérubé pointed out in 1978. I relate Lee's social science religious instruction proposal to his understandings of God's transcendence, revelation, the image of humanity (faith in relation to action; the nature of sin; conversion). Lee's position in the Niebuhr Christ-culture typology is not the same as other practitioners. I show that other understandings are possible.

My display of Lee's theology undermines Lee's claim to have provided a macro-theory for religious education. The ability to specify Lee's theology makes it clear that rather than being generic or universal in scope, his social science religious instruction theory expresses foundational commitments -- as do religious education proposals generally. Lee's social science religious instruction is a problematic theory to some theologically committed educators because his particular theology is not shared by all. Of course, not all educators need to share a theology, but those who propose a master theory need to show that their proposal does not depend on their own theological position.

Chapter 5 tells the implications of the study. Social sciences are not properly foundational but mediate philosophical-theological assumptions to the level of practice. Education theory arises from philosophical-theological assumptions within a cultural or historical setting; for example, the education theory of Dewey. So, what are the true methodological bases of religious education?

Lee's question mark against dogmatics (propositional theology) as directing religious educating is valid enough. Most theorists will concede that instructional procedure based solely on dogmatic formulations is inadequate. Dogmatics gives no direct means of evaluation. Dogmatics gives little direct help to the practice of teaching.

Religious education's need is the ability to mediate basic theological understandings of God, humanity, the church, society, into personal and corporate practices consistent with those understandings. Missing in religious education is a well-articulated link between theology and Christian practice. In the wake of reflection on the theology-social science relation, an understanding of humanness consistent with the educator's stance must be employed in religious education. Links between education and Christian anthropology have become visible. Assumptions to do with the nature of persons, the church, or society -- now found to be inherent in social sciences -- may no longer be taken over uncritically.

Appropriation of social sciences must parallel the philosophical-theological starting point of the practitioner. Social science will continue to play varied roles in religious education method. However, the appropriation must be critical. The point of Baum, Browning, and Milbank is that social science usage has been uncritical. It is essential to frankly acknowledge one's worldview and to see that all facts are identified within a worldview. Disputes about "facts" are at some level disputes about rival worldviews. The ways that Christian educators use social science must become open to scrutiny.

Certain educators have taken theological positions similar to James Michael Lee. Some practical theologians, such as Johannes Van der Ven, continue to advance positivistic proposals. While Lee's (and Van der Ven's) immanentism is not accepted by all religious educators, some do understand God's working in the world that way and could adopt social sciences in immanentist fashion. The existence of such theorists points to a continuing pluralism in religious education.

Theologies must be capable of generating applications. Lee's empiricism-versus-theology polemic is a symptom of the need for a yet-deeper theoretical basis for religious education. Lee proves to have provided openings to important methodological concerns.

Methodological clarity will yield legitimate ways that religious educators can compare notes with each other. Mapping methodological variance can only improve practice.

The dissertation is in book form as "Education Has Nothing To Do With Theology": James Michael Lee's *Social Science Religious Instruction* (2006) in the Princeton Theological Monograph Series available from Wipf and Stock. *Christian Education Journal* (Spring 2006) has an article that summarizes one major strand. The dissertation is in the Gottesman Libraries at Teacher's College, Columbia University.