

Proceedings

of the

**Pennsylvania Adult and
Continuing Education
Research Conference**

October 8, 1994

Edited by

Gary J. Dean and Trenton R. Ferro

**Proceedings printed by
Adult and Community Education
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, Pennsylvania**

1994 Pennsylvania Adult & Continuing Education Research Conference

Refereed Papers

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY AND THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR ADULT EDUCATION: THE GOSPEL OF THE AAAE

Fred Milacci

ABSTRACT: Using the findings from an analysis of articles appearing in the *Journal of Adult Education*, this paper shows how early adult educators used religious imagery to express their fervor and enthusiasm for the field of adult education. This religious-like sense of mission and purpose among early leaders in the field was grounded in the belief that adult education could bring hope and help to a troubled world and provides a refreshing alternative to the present day push towards professionalization.

INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to examine the impact of religion—particularly mainstream Protestantism—on contemporary adult education in America. Since it is generally agreed that modern adult education in this country began with the formation of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) in the 1920's (Stubblefield, 1988) the study will concern itself with how contemporary adult education has been affected by religion by examining the influence of religion in the early years of the AAAE. First, the historical and religious climate that existed during the time in which the AAAE was founded will be considered. Then the study will focus on the writings of adult educators of that era (particularly those found in the official organ of the AAAE, *The Journal of Adult Education*) to see what, if any, influence religion had on the adult education movement in those early days.

THE HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS CLIMATE OF THE DAY

The Formation of the AAAE

Adult education has played a significant role in American society almost since the time of its inception. Over time, as the nation in general went through a process of maturation, expansion and development, the field of American adult education also began to mature, expand and develop. So much so, in fact, that by the early 1900's, a national - not federal - system of adult education was in place (Stubblefield, 1988). At that time, adults learned through many sources such as chautauquas, lyceum lectures, correspondence schools, university extension, as well as programs sponsored by voluntary associations. Yet, in spite of all of the adult education activity, there seemed to be little sense of direction and coherence in the movement.

Fred Milacci is a Graduate Student at The Pennsylvania State University.

Though the identity of the person (or persons) primarily responsible for bringing direction and coherence to the field is debated by some, Stubblefield (1988) observes there is almost unanimous agreement that "the most active force in the adult education field [at this time] was not an institution or scholar but the Carnegie Corporation of New York City" (p. 22). It was through the activities and financial backing of the Carnegie Corporation that the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) came into existence in 1926 (Rose, 1989).

The executive board of the Association chose Morse A. Cartwright as its executive director. As executive director, it was Cartwright's responsibility to interpret what the Association meant by the term adult education as well as define what the purpose of the Association would be. He immediately sought to stake out the middle of the road for the AAAE, as indicated in his first annual report to the Association.

A sincere and compelling desire to proceed conservatively and constructively, even if slowly, has been uppermost in the minds of the staff and committees of the Association. . . . The Association might have endorsed the five-week day; it did not. It might have enlisted a campaign of intergroup religious understanding, [or] devoted its efforts to vocational education, immigrant education workers' education . . . it did none of these. (Ely, 1936)

In his report to the Association the following year, Cartwright reaffirmed this neutral stance.

It must be remembered that the Association stands at the center of many diverging and at times conflicting views, not only upon educational questions but upon economic, political, religious, and even moral questions as well. If the ultimate ends of adult education are to be reached, the Association representing the movement must be directly in the middle of the road; it must veer neither to the right nor to the left. (Ely 1936)

This claim to neutrality by Cartwright is significant for at least two reasons. First, by claiming to have no, or at best a middle of the road position on controversial issues, in reality the AAAE did espouse a position: to deliberately ignore and exclude from discussion in the field of adult education any and all social, economic, political and religious issues— issues that were pertinent to the times— that might be construed as offensive or controversial. Even more significant for the purposes of this study is the fact that the AAAE never really was neutral when it came to the matter of espousing a particular religious perspective at all. Rather, as it will be shown later, there was a definitive and documentable leaning among some adult educators of the day towards a liberal, modernist, Protestant, religious position. Furthermore, in addition to the obvious absence of almost all other religious points of view in the journal, some authors (Martin, 1929) were actually critical of those who did not share their liberal religious perspective, particularly those that could be classified as "evangelicals" or "fundamentalists."

The Religious Climate During the Early 20th Century

Unquestionably, the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries were

times of great transition in the United States. Events such as industrialization, massive immigration, the general acceptance of Darwinian evolution as well as dynamic changes in American education (from a traditional to progressive approach) precipitated some of the most dramatic societal changes ever to occur. Virtually every aspect of American life was impacted by these events-- including religion.

The religious climate in America was forever changed by the cultural transformation the nation was undergoing at this time, a transformation that ultimately led to the formation of theological liberalism. As religious historian and educator John Elias (1982) observes,

The theological counterpart to progressive or pragmatic thought were Liberal Protestantism, Modernism and Reform Judaism. In these theologies human experience, reason, and feeling become the major source of theology. The religious tradition was no longer viewed as a divine and supernatural message. Religious symbols were reinterpreted to correspond to contemporary human experience. (p. 161)

As Elias notes, liberalism was essentially the union of the new scientific pragmatism with old religious doctrine, with doctrine taking on a decidedly subordinate role. In practice, liberalism came to mean experience superseded Scripture, scientific method was preferred over supernaturalism and personal growth and social change became the center of both thought and action.

In spite of Cartwright's claim to religious "middle-of-the-roadism", the Protestant liberal perspective seemed to dominate the few references to religion that were present in the early volumes of the *Journal of Adult Education* (Barnes, 1932; Martin, 1929; Masterman, 1929). In part, this was due to the widespread popularity and acceptance of theological liberalism during that time period. Many religious seminaries wholeheartedly embraced liberalism because it offered a seemingly acceptable compromise between religion and science-- particularly Darwinism. These seminaries in turn turned out scores of ministers trained by liberal teachers who then proceeded to popularize these ideas from the pulpit. As evidenced from their writings, many early adult educators sat under the modernist message these pulpits proclaimed.

This liberal Protestant orientation in the journal can also be traced to the presence of two original members of the Carnegie Corporation's adult education advisory board, the board instrumental in the founding of the AAAE. Everett Dean Martin and Eduard Lindeman, both members of that board, had at one point in their careers served as ministers in liberal Protestant churches (Stubblefield, 1988; Long, 1989). Although Martin and Lindeman left their respective pulpit ministries, they seemingly never left their liberal theology.

In fairness it should be noted that liberal Protestant doctrine in no way dominated the content of the early issues of the journal. Rather, the bulk of the religious references in these volumes was by nature more metaphorical than theological and contained more religious imagery for adult education than religious indoctrination through adult education.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELIGIOUS CONTENT IN THE AAAE JOURNAL

Perusing through the early articles in the journal one quickly discovers that not only did religion have some influence on the adult education movement, but adult education had an impact of its own on religion. As Cartwright in his 1930-31 report observed

The sphere of influence of the Association is not alone to be measured within the field of adult education. The spread of the concept of adult learning is today showing its most marked effect in the ranks of the heretofore unconverted. The press, the pulpit, the public schools.. have caught the idea that learning is a continuous process. (Ely, 1936)

Cartwright was not alone in this observation. Stockman (1931) wrote an article for the journal entitled "Protestants See A New Light," documenting the upsurge in interest in adult education in Protestant churches. F. Ernest Johnson, writing in the journal in 1934, provided another example of this influence when he stated, "The question whether the church should carry on an adult education program of its own or participate in general community enterprises loses its point, for quite obviously it should do both" (Ely, 1936, p. 147).

What precipitated this flood of interest in adult education among churches? Bernard Meland, who was commissioned at that time by the Association to author a book on the subject of *The Church and Adult Education* (1939) stated, "it is not so much by choice, then, as in response to insistent and imperative demands that the church and synagogue have acquired the modern tempo [for adult education]" (p.8). Knowles (1977) is perhaps a bit more realistic when he states that the most compelling reason for the church's involvement in adult education was that their members began to fulfill their needs in associations other than the church, with the result that the church sensed a threat to its claim on its members. Ultimately, determining why churches were influenced by the adult education movement is not as important as appreciating the benefits they have reaped as a result of this influence.

Reading through the early volumes of the journal, it would appear that the AAAE's stated policy avoiding potentially controversial subjects such as religious ideology was successful. Clearly, the tone and nature of the journal is educational and not religious. But upon closer examination, one would soon discover that there are in fact a number of articles in those volumes written by several different authors which contain either direct or indirect (through the use of imagery) references to religious literature, individuals, institutions or events. Some of the religious content in these articles is critical of orthodox or conservative religion. For example, Everett Martin (1929b), in an article entitled "The Dangers of Democracy," decries what he sees as orthodox religion's hostility towards education. "We live today in a world where many elements of the population are hostile to education. . . . Foremost among them is the Protestant principle of the right of private interpretation" (p. 260).

In another article that same year, Martin (1929a) laments the church's belief in salvation and evangelism as well as its militant and, as he sees it, intolerant stance. According to him,

the church has always been militant, always been at war. Christianity is a crusading religion. And so the idea of the church at war with the world came to America, and to the evangelistic reform psychology were added an impulse to crusading and an attitude of intolerance. Liberty cannot prevail against such an attitude, for we get from it a sanction for manipulating and regulating our fellowman. (p. 32)

Martin was not the only adult educator to be critical of traditional religion in the *Journal of Adult Education*. Harry Barnes (1936) saw the church as being out of touch, having made "little progress since Tom Paine" (p. 36). He adds that "religion has but a handful of followers; morals are still based on theological formulas for heavenly salvation instead of informed secular guidance for happiness and well-being here and now." Charles Judd (1930) expressed his belief that religion proved to be a hindrance to the advancement of adult education by dictating religious ritual and encouraging routineness among its followers. Cartwright (1930) saw religion as another form of propaganda as well as a hindrance to education, a thought echoed by Masterman (1929). F. Ernest Johnson (Ely, 1936), believed that adult education in the church would most likely be frustrated by the "narrow doctrinal beliefs" (p. 147) of religion. Kenyor. Butterfield (1929) reprimanded the rural church in particular for not rising

to its opportunity for rural adult education. Its education service has been largely in doctrine if not dogma. It would be of inestimable service to its members if it [would do] educational work that gives relevant interpretation to all of life. (p. 392)

One author, Franklin J. Keller, even questioned the competency of some religious professionals when he said that "pastors and missionaries are likely to be dangerous in their enthusiasms; they are often long on advice and short on facts (Ely, 1936)."

Not all of the religious references in the early volumes of the journal were so critical of orthodox religion. Some references were made in a manner that could be characterized as being said almost in passing, indicative of the fact that not only were many of the authors familiar with the Bible and other religious jargon and that it was assumed most of the readers would have a similar familiarity. For example, Alvin Saunders Johnson (1929) makes reference not only to Jesus, but to the Apostle Paul and his visit to Athens as recorded in Acts 17 (p. 51) a reference that would most likely not be familiar to someone who was not well acquainted with Scripture. In similar fashion, Philip Jordan (1930) makes reference to the Pope, Moses, St. Augustine and John Calvin.

Other such instances include that of Leon Richardson (1929) who quotes a passage from the little known Old Testament book of Ecclesiastics, stating that "the wisdom of the learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure." In the same issue of the journal, Alonzo Grace (1929) uses the religious concept of sin metaphorically by speaking of the "sins committed in the name of education" (p. 271). Even famed adult educator Mary Ely (1936), in her book which is a

compilation of AAAE journal articles from 1929 through 1936, quotes the Apostle Paul's words, "Nevertheless, he that standeth stedfast in his heart, doeth well" (p. 449), a passage taken from the epistle to the Corinthians.

Perhaps most intriguing are those religious references in the journal that were metaphorically applied to the field of adult education. For example, the very first article in the first issue was written by Lawrence P. Jacks (1929) and titled "Breadwinning and Soulsaving." The religious imagery conveyed by the use of word "soulsaving" in the title alone speaks volumes, and this type of imagery is carried consistently throughout the entire article, as illustrated by the following quote:

the final objective of the New Education is the gradual transformation of the industry of the world into the university of the world; in other words, the gradual bringing about of a state of things in which 'breadwinning' and 'soulsaving' . . . become a single and continuous operation. (p. 10)

Others joined Jacks in using such metaphors to express the belief that the adult education movement might possibly bring about the salvation of mankind from all of the societal and economic ills that existed during that time. Nathaniel Peffer (1930), for example, in an article entitled "We May Not Yet Be Saved," emphatically proclaimed that "if our fears were unnecessary, our hopes were not. With all due discount for belief in quick salvation by causes, our faith that this one [adult education] has intrinsic worth can remain unshaken" (p. 28). Another author, Anne Jackson (1931) believed that "adult education must move fast if it is to accomplish our salvation" (p. 442). Still other examples include Frederick Keppel's (1932) usage of definitively religious terms such as "evangelical spirit" and "Messianic" (p. 287) to describe the positive role educational service agencies can play in society and culture, Lucy Wilcox Adams' (Ely, 1936) reference to the potential "Messianic role" of education, and Johnson's (1929) reference to Jesus who "did not summon up eager-eyed youths to receive the discipline of a new ethics, but bearded men, heads of households" (p. 49).

These same kinds of metaphors are used by John Finley (1932) who likens education to a "flame of God" and a "divine aura" (p. 127). Other religious imagery is seen in Robert Hill's (1929) reference to the "missionary zeal [of adult education] which may prompt them in their efforts" (p. 419), Dorothy Canfield Fisher's (Ely, 1936) usage of the terms "Devil," "the light" and the phrase "pulpits above a submissive crowd" (p. 15), and in the titles of two articles which appeared in the second issue of the journal (1929), "A Parable in Adult Education" and "Light in Dark Places." When viewed collectively, these references testify to the fact that religion was instrumental in articulating the fervent and enthusiastic spirit with which the early adult educators approached their field.

CONCLUSION

Considering the economic and political woes plaguing society during this period in history, and

in light of all that the advances in science and education had promised to offer, it is not surprising that many early adult educators believed that their field offered hope to a troubled world. Furthermore, due to the obvious influence religion had on many of these same educators, it is also not surprising that many of them chose to trumpet that hope through the usage of religious metaphors.

This study revealed how many of the early leaders in the contemporary adult education movement applied religious metaphors to the field of adult education. This practice was indicative of the religious-like fervor these early leaders had for the movement and hints at their belief that the "gospel" of adult education could bring hope and help to a world in great need. In a day in which professionalization has been touted as the desirable approach to the field of adult education, this sense of mission and purpose exhibited by these early leaders—who were no less professional—is not only refreshing, it is (or at least, it ought to be) slightly convicting.

REFERENCES

- Adams, L. W. (1936). Civic agencies. In Ely, M. (Ed.), *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Adams, L. W. (1931). What do we want of education? *Journal of Adult Education*, 4(2).
- Baker, N. D. (1929). As a bystander sees it. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(4).
- Barnes, H. E. (1932). Education for social progress. *Journal of Adult Education*, 4(4).
- Buchanan, S. (1929). A parable in adult education. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(2).
- Butterfield, K. L. (1929). Adult education among rural people. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(4).
- Cartwright, M. A. (1930). Education and propaganda. *Journal of Adult Education*, 2(2).
- Elias, J. (1982). *The foundations and practice of adult religious education*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Ely, M. (Ed.). (1936). *Adult education in action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Finley, J. F. (1932). The mystery of the mind's desire. *Journal of Adult Education*, 4(2).
- Fisher, D. C. (1936). To meet the challenge of free choice. In M. Ely (Ed.), *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Grace, A. (1929). Thinking through in the schools. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(2).
- Hill, R. T. (1929). Why begin learning? *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(4).
- Jacks, L. P. (1929). Breadwinning and soulsaving. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(1).
- Jacks, L. P. (1931). The Education of the Whole Man. *Journal of Adult Education*, 3(1).
- Jackson, A. (1931). An apology for lectures. *Journal of Adult Education*, 3(4).
- Johnson, A. S. (1929). Vitality in teaching. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(1).
- Johnson, A. S. (1936). Reaffirmation. In M. Ely (Ed.) *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Johnson, F. E. (1936). The church an educational asset. In M. Ely (Ed.) *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Jordan, P. D. (1930). Contemporary thought for adults. *Journal of Adult Education*, 2(4).
- Judd, C. H. (1930). Understanding our hindrances. *Journal of Adult Education*, 2(3).

- Keller, F. J. (1936). Functions indicated for adjustment services. In M. Ely (Ed.) *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Keppel, F. P. (1932). Educational service stations. *Journal of Adult Education*, 4(3).
- Knowles, M. (1977). *A history of the adult education movement in the United States*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- Long, H. B. (1989). Editor's preface. In E. Lindeman, *The meaning of adult education*. Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press.
- MacCormick, A. (1929). Light in dark places. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(2).
- Martin, E. (1929). Liberating liberty. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(1).
- Martin, E. (1929). The dangers of democracy. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(3).
- Masterman, J. H. (1929). Spiritual self-realization. *Journal of Adult Education*, 1(4).
- Meland, B. E. (1939). *The church and adult education*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Peffer, N. (1930). We may yet be saved. *Journal of Adult Education*, 2(1).
- Peffer, N. (1936). Recantation. In M. Ely (Ed.) *Adult Education in Action*. New York: American Association for Adult Education.
- Richardson, L. J. (1929). In the spirit of the learner. *Journal Of Adult Education*, 1(3).
- Rose, A. D. (1989). Beyond classroom walls: The Carnegie Corporation and the founding of the American Association for Adult Education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 39 (3).
- Stockman, R. W. (1931). Protestants see a new light. *Journal of Adult Education*, 3(1).
- Stubblefield, H. W. (1988). *Towards a history of adult education in America*. London: Croom Helm.