

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ecclesial Enculturation: John Westerhoff's Appeal to Catechesis in Contemporary Theological Education

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Abstract

This article explores the appeal to catechesis in the writings of Anglican theologian and educator John Westerhoff III (1933–2022). I argue that he proposed the concept of catechesis as a way of critiquing and incorporating the streams of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy from the early and mid-twentieth century into a more comprehensive and theologically substantive approach to theological education. In doing so, he used the language of catechesis as a means of integrating the strengths of liberalism's emphasis on nurture and enculturation and neo-orthodoxy's accent on conversion, the church and the uniqueness of Christianity. His appeal to catechesis, then, was not a retrieval or *ressourcement* of patristic catechesis. While he appreciated the term's antiquity, the way in which he described the term was more indebted to contemporary education theory than patristics, particularly the anthropological insights of socialization theory.

Keywords: catechesis; education; John Westerhoff; liberalism; neo-orthodoxy; *ressourcement*; retrieval

John Westerhoff III (1933–2022) was one of the most incisive voices championing the recovery of catechesis as a source of renewing contemporary theological and church-based education. Originally ordained in the United Church of Christ in 1958, Westerhoff became an Episcopalian priest in the late 1970s after joining the faculty at Duke Divinity School, where he remained until his retirement in 1994. As a professor of Theology and Christian Nurture and long-time editor of the journal *Religious Education*, he is most often associated with the field of religious education. Several dissertations¹ and scholarly

¹See John Patrick Nicholson, 'A Critical Analysis of the Theological, Sociological, Educational, and Organizational Dimensions of Westerhoff's Socialization-Enculturation Paradigm' (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1981); Adynna Yap Lim, 'A Comparative Study of the Socialization Models of Christian Education by John H. Westerhoff III and Lawrence O. Richards' (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1982);



articles² have examined his conception of a ‘community of faith-enculturation’ model of education.³ However, the term he most often used to describe his approach to Christian education was catechesis. Drawing from the broad scope of the Christian tradition, both ancient and modern, Westerhoff was a tireless promoter of catechesis as a means of fostering mature Christian believers.

In this essay, I explore what Westerhoff meant by the term ‘catechesis’, how it functioned in his overall work and what he hoped to accomplish by deploying it. His use of the language of catechesis served the purpose, I argue, both to critique certain tendencies in twentieth-century religious education and to incorporate their divergent aspects into a more comprehensive framework. He sought to move beyond the dichotomies of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy and chart a more integrated and theologically substantive approach to church-based education. Catechesis, for Westerhoff, incorporated the strengths of liberalism’s emphasis on socialization, nurture and enculturation, coupled with the neo-orthodox accent on conversion and the uniqueness of Christianity.⁴ His turn to the early church was, therefore, not so much a recovery of an ancient practice of catechesis, as was the case with Catholic *ressourcement* theologians like Jean Daniélou or Josef Jungmann, but an attempt to reconcile and critique contemporary models of education, which were fundamentally shaped in an American context in which liberalism and neo-orthodoxy were the primary categories.⁵ While he appreciated the term’s antiquity, he rarely appealed to early Christian texts in a substantive manner to sketch a new

Michael S. Bickford, ‘John H. Westerhoff III: A Humanistic and Historical Analysis of His Impact on Religious Education’ (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2011).

²K. Llovio, ‘Toward a Definition of Christian Education: A Comparison of Richards and Westerhoff’, *Christian Education Journal* 5.2 (1984), pp. 15–23; David Heywood, ‘Christian Education as Enculturation: The Life of the Community and Its Place in Christian Education in the Work of John Westerhoff III’, *British Journal of Religious Education* 10.2 (1988), pp. 65–71.

³For Westerhoff as a paradigm of ‘enculturation’ or ‘community of faith’ approaches, see Jack Seymour, ‘Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education’, in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Colin Crowder, and Leslie J. Francis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 3–13; Charles R. Foster, ‘The Faith Community as a Guiding Image for Christian Education’, in *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp. 53–71. See also the helpful summary in *Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 173–188.

⁴His integrative approach has often led many interpreters unsure where to situate him. Perry Downs (*Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 156) lists him as one of the main critics of the liberal tradition, while Thomas Groome (*Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980], p. 121) situates him precisely within the liberal tradition.

⁵For examples of what I would characterize as a *ressourcement* of catechesis, see, for example, Josef Jungmann, *Handing on the Faith: A Manual of Catechesis*, trans. A. N. Fuerst (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959); Jean Daniélou, ‘Catechesis in the Patristic Tradition’, trans. Alex Fogleman, *Communio* 47.3 (2020), pp. 617–633. On the notions of *ressourcement* or retrieval as a form of theological method, see John Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 583–599; and Darren Sarrisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T&T Clark, 2017). On *ressourcement* as a historical-theological movement, see Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, ed., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

model of catechesis for today. Rather, he described catechesis in terms more indebted to contemporary education theory, particularly the anthropological insights of socialization theory. By appropriating the older terminology of catechesis, he sought a new vocabulary to overcome the deficiencies of both liberal and neo-orthodox theologies of education. Such an approach, though, should be seen as distinct from a *ressourcement* or retrieval of patristic catechesis.

After first offering a brief biographical sketch, I offer an exposition of his understanding of catechesis in the context of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy and then provide three instances of how he utilized catechesis as a critique of contemporary religious education.

From Religious Educationist to Catechist: A Biographical Sketch

Born in 1933 to a nominally Christian New Jersey family, Westerhoff was baptized in a Presbyterian church and later attended a Dutch Reformed church in his teens.⁶ A zeal for the Christian faith during his undergraduate years at Ursinus College in Collegetown, Pennsylvania, earned him the nickname 'Preach', before he went to receive a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard. At Harvard, he studied under an esteemed set of faculty members, including the Russian Orthodox patristics scholar Georges Florovsky, the Roman Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, the New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl, and the Anglican classicist, Arthur Darby Nock. During the same period, he also served as a youth pastor at First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Needham, Massachusetts, under the pastorate of Herbert Smith. These crucial years, which he would later describe as 'the most significant and transforming years' of his life, were important also for his later writing about catechesis.⁷ In particular, he learned from Tillich the priority of experiential, intuitive and affective modes of knowing, and from Herbert Smith the importance of liturgy and aesthetics as a constituent feature of education.⁸ After his graduation from Harvard in 1958, he pastored a New England UCC congregation, while also serving on education boards and founding a journal on religious education, *Colloquy*, which ran from 1967 to 1974. During this period, he also undertook significant global travel and research, which alerted him to the importance of social justice as it related to education,⁹ and gave him access to several significant educational theorists.¹⁰

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was primarily interested in defining and articulating an alternative notion of Christian education, while still inhabiting this traditional paradigm. However, in the 1970s, with subscriptions to *Colloquy*

⁶The biographical account that follows is largely based on Westerhoff's autobiographical narrative in John Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd ed. (New York: Morehouse, 2012), pp. ix–xviii.

⁷Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. xi.

⁸Paul Bramer, 'John Westerhoff, III', Talbot School of Theology, *Christian Educators of the 20th Century Project*, ed. Kevin Lawson. http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/john_westerhoff/.

⁹In John Westerhoff III, 'The Church and Education Debate', *Religious Education* 67.1 (1972), pp. 49–59, he explored the importance of the Bergen, Greenwich, and Lima conferences on religious education, and what the church could learn from Latin America.

¹⁰John H. Westerhoff III, ed., *A Colloquy on Christian Education* (Philadelphia, PA: Pilgrim Press, 1972) was the output of a series of conferences and papers initiated by this travel and research.

dropping, and his own theological views shifting, he began to chart a new course. He saw that what was needed was not a correction of a foundationally sound model but a new foundation. Intellectually, he began to engage more deeply with Latin American liberation theology, patristic and medieval history, and the Roman Catholic catechetical tradition – an eclectic theological position he would later name ‘neo-liberal liberation-hope theology.’¹¹ His new understanding of education also owed much to the influence of C. Ellis Nelson, a Presbyterian theologian and educator who drew on anthropological studies to develop an educational model emphasizing socialization within a community of faith.¹² Westerhoff pursued a doctorate in education from Columbia University Teachers College in 1974, where he researched educational trends in the nineteenth century. Shortly thereafter, he took a position at Duke Divinity School, where he would remain until his retirement in 1994 as Professor of Theology and Religious Nurture. In 1978, another momentous point in his journey came when he was ordained in the Episcopal church, a decision which he said allowed him to embrace both the ‘Catholic substance and the Protestant principle.’¹³ The Anglican tradition, for Westerhoff, provided an ecclesial structure amenable to the insights of early Christianity, which propelled his appropriation of the language of catechesis.

From the late 1970s, he published numerous books and articles related to Christian education, in which he drew repeatedly on the notion of catechesis.¹⁴ He sought to refurbish this concept from its patristic origins and utilize it for the needs of the contemporary church. He also gave increased attention to the role of aesthetics and ritual in catechetical education.¹⁵ His best-known work, *Will our Children Have Faith?*, was published in three editions (1976, 2000, 2012) and translated into six languages and is often seen as providing the clearest outline of his ‘social enculturation’ model of Christian education.¹⁶ Upon his retirement from Duke in 1994, he worked for several years in Durham as a priest with the Anglican monastic community at St. John’s House, after which he relocated to Atlanta where he served at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church and St. Anne’s Episcopal Church until his death in February of 2022.

¹¹John H. Westerhoff III and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation to Generation: Conversations on Religious Education and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1974), p. 19.

¹²Nelson’s most significant work was *Where Faith Begins* (Louisville: John Knox, 1967). On his influence and similarities to Westerhoff, see Bickford, ‘A Humanistic and Historical Analysis’, pp. 53–56.

¹³John H. Westerhoff III, ‘A Journey into Self-understanding’, in *Modern Masters of Religious Education*, ed. Marlene Mayr (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1983), pp. 115–134 [134]. See also John H. Westerhoff III, *Inner Growth Outer Change: An Educational Guide to Church Renewal* (New York: Crossroad, 1979).

¹⁴On his early articulation of catechesis, see John H. Westerhoff III, ‘A Call to Catechesis’, *The Living Light* 14.3 (1977), pp. 354–358; John H. Westerhoff, ed., *Who Are We? A Quest for A Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1978); and John H. Westerhoff and O. C. Edwards, Jr., eds., *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1981); Westerhoff, ‘A Catechetical Way of Doing Theology’, in *Religious Education and Theology*, ed. Norma Thompson (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1982), pp. 218–242.

¹⁵John H. Westerhoff III and G. K. Neville, *Learning through Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); and John H. Westerhoff III and William Willimon, *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

¹⁶Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* esp. chap. 2, “Beginning and Ending with Faith.”

Made Not Born: Defining Catechesis in Light of Liberal and Neo-Orthodox Education

Central to Westerhoff's view of education was the ancient axiom of the second-century church father Tertullian: 'Christians are made, not born.'¹⁷ Westerhoff identified this principle as the primary question that churches should be addressing. For too long, he opined, churches had been captive to pedagogical models concerned with curricula, learning objectives and other secular methods, but possessed a theologically thin account of why Christians ought to be educated at all. Enamoured with secular methods, pastors and Christian teachers had forgotten the more primary question: How are Christians *made*?

In chronicling the problems in contemporary religious education, Westerhoff identified several methodological and theoretical problems, and he proposed catechesis as their solution. At the root of the methodological deficiencies was the church's captivity to what he called the 'schooling-instructional paradigm.' Though he would later qualify his strong opposition to this view,¹⁸ for most of his career he led a crusade against what he described as the 'bankruptcy' of a content-centred intellectualist model of education.¹⁹ 'Faced with curricular needs', he wrote in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 'we turn to technology and neglect new ways of being together. Faced with nonresponsive students, we turn to psychology to understand and control behaviour instead of reflection on the meaning of two persons in relationship.'²⁰ In sum, churches too often merely ape non-Christian educational models, while neglecting to question their theoretical assumptions. It is unsurprising, Westerhoff concluded, that Christians lived only marginally different lives than their non-Christian neighbours.

In place of the schooling-instructional model, Westerhoff proposed the recovery of catechesis. He was attracted to the notion, he said at one point, because 'it is a church word', and did not immediately take its cues from the secular disciplines of the social sciences.²¹ More importantly, he thought that catechesis linked the contemporary church to the ancient church, thereby bypassing many of the Enlightenment-laden assumptions that had largely determined the character of contemporary education models.²² At its most basic, catechesis named, for Westerhoff, 'the process of preparing people for baptism.'²³ A sub-discipline of practical theology, catechesis

¹⁷He discusses this idea, which comes from Tertullian, *Apology* 18, in John H. Westerhoff III, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', *Religious Education* 82 (1987), pp. 578–591 (at 580); and Paul Watson, 'Making Christians: An Interview with John Westerhoff', *Leaven* 4.3: *Children and the Church* (1996), pp. 16–20 (at 16). For the most part, however, references to particular church fathers are sparse.

¹⁸Particularly in the Afterword to the 3rd edition of *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

¹⁹Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. 20.

²⁰Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. 16.

²¹Westerhoff, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', p. 580.

²²John H. Westerhoff III, *Building God's People in a Materialistic Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 142: Guarding against the Protestant temptation to eschew the old for the sake of the new, he sought to "reform and reintroduce the language of catechetics." He champions this language because of its "liturgical foundations" and also for the way in which it provides a "sense of continuity with the past in a day when our efforts are shallow because we are singularly enamored of the understandings and ways of our scientific, post-Enlightenment, modern age."

²³Watson, 'Making Christians: An Interview with John Westerhoff', p. 16.

comprises several forms of education, in which not only the pastor but also the whole community played important roles. At one point, he defined catechesis with regard to its focus on 'life in a learning community.' That is, catechesis is the

formation or the processes by which we are initiated into the church and its tradition, and reflection on experience, which also includes the converting and nurturing processes by which we are aided to live into our baptism by making the church's faith more living conscious, and active, by deepening our relationship to God, and by realizing our vocation, including reflection on experience.²⁴

Catechesis, in short, was a way of incorporating Christians into an alternative community, but in a way that took seriously the role of the ecclesial community in shaping the attitudes and instincts of those new believers. In Westerhoff's vision, this view of catechesis moved local church congregations to the centre, rather than periphery, of reflection on Christian education.

The dual emphasis of catechesis as 'conversion' and 'nurture' in the definition just cited characterizes the way in which Westerhoff sought to integrate the educational efforts of early twentieth-century liberalism with a neo-orthodoxy emphasis on conversion. Liberal education theorists such as George A. Coe, William Rainey Harper, Henry F. Cope and Harold Elliot were instrumental in shaping religious education in the twentieth century.²⁵ Drawing on the philosophical and methodological work of John Dewey (1859–1952) and Horace Bushnell (1802–1876), the liberal theorists gave institutional shape to these ideas in the founding of the Religious Education Association (REA) in 1903, and its journal *Religious Education* in 1906, for which Westerhoff served as an editor from 1977 to 1987.²⁶

However, Westerhoff also drew deeply on the neo-orthodox tradition of writers like H. Shelton Smith (1893–1987), Westerhoff's predecessor at Duke, whose 1941 *Faith and Nurture* marked a 'watershed' in education theory by exposing the unbridgeable gap between liberalism and neo-orthodoxy.²⁷ Smith's work was furthered by Randolph Crump Miller (1910–2002), who served the REA or its journal in various capacities from 1956 to 1992, and thus shaped a new course for

²⁴Westerhoff, *Building God's People*, p. 9.

²⁵For an overview of this period, with consideration of the distinction between progressivism and liberalism, see William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

²⁶See John H. Westerhoff III, 'Reflections on the Anniversary of REA', *Religious Education* 100.4 (2005), pp. 345–352.

²⁷Kenneth Barker, *Religious Education, Catechesis, and Freedom* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1981), p. 30. Barker goes on to list six key criticisms that Smith made of liberalism: (1) liberals had relied too heavily on the social sciences for their understanding of the human person in relation to society and culture; (2) they underappreciated the reality and effect of human sinfulness; (3) the social gospel influence had led to a collapsing of the distinction between the kingdom of God and human society; (4) an overemphasis on the social had led to a devaluation of the individual; (5) a concern for education had superseded ecclesial concerns; and (6), when the church was considered, it was so only as an empirical reality within liberalism's sociologically informed matrix (*Religious Education*, pp. 32–34).

the REA from its more explicitly liberal foundations.²⁸ While liberal education theorists stressed the importance of nurture and the community's role in education, the neo-orthodox stressed the difference that being Christian made and the profound importance of conversion to an alternative way of life. For Westerhoff, the term 'catechesis' provided a means of appropriating the best insights of these two traditions, while attempting to overcome their pitfalls.

At the same time, Westerhoff's understanding of catechesis as ecclesial enculturation also highlights the limits of his understanding of early Christian catechesis. The very language used to define catechesis was borrowed as much from contemporary discourse of 'nurture', 'reflection on experience', 'enculturation', 'critical education' and 'consciousness', as much as – and I would suggest *more than* – the language of patristic theology and ecclesiology. This language shows the extent to which his concerns and fundamental assumptions remained indebted to modern traditions, even as he sought to critique their assumptions through recourse to early Christian catechesis.

Catechesis as Critique: Three Criticisms of Contemporary Education Theory and Practice

To explore Westerhoff's understanding of catechesis in more detail, I want to highlight three ways in which he diagnosed the problems behind what he called the schooling-instructional model of religious education, and how catechesis presented a solution. First, he criticized its reductionist focus on instruction and offered catechesis as a more comprehensive approach to education. Second, he critiqued the insufficiently scriptural metaphors (those of 'production' or 'organic growth') to describe contemporary education and offered instead the biblical image of pilgrimage. And third, he criticized the de-churched approach to education in contemporary religious education and promoted catechesis as a practice centred specifically on Christ within the ecclesial community. In each of these critiques, catechesis serves a means of reconciling the rifts created by the liberal and neo-orthodox divides.

The Reductionist Critique: From Instruction to Formation-Education-Instruction

One of the chief failures of the school-instructional paradigm was its reductionist focus on instruction alone, and a disregard for the unspoken norms and socializing conditions that taught students in a more implicit fashion. To appraise the situation of this educational focus on instruction, Westerhoff analysed the problem historically, focusing his efforts chiefly on the liberal/neo-orthodox divisions of the twentieth century. He identified Coe's *A Social Theory of Religious Education*²⁹

²⁸Randolph Crump Miller, *The Clue to Education* (New York: Scribner, 1950), vii: Crediting Smith's *Faith and Nurture* as 'the chief stimulus to my thought,' Miller described the preceding decades as an 'apparent failure of Christian educators to take seriously . . . the relation of the content of the Christian revelation to the best creative methods of teaching.'

²⁹Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. 26.

and Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*³⁰ as crucial points in the formation of contemporary theories of religious education, and he saw neo-orthodoxy as a 'complementary' but heretofore unreconciled theological response.³¹ The liberal theorists, on Westerhoff's account, rightly emphasized the role of enculturation and nurture, which presumed a theological affirmation of God's indwelling presence in the world, but tended to downplay the role of conversion.³² Neo-orthodoxy, on the other hand, rightly stressed conversion and placed more weight on God's transcendent nature vis-à-vis human aptitude. However, as a reactionary theology, neo-orthodoxy downplayed the strengths of liberalism and, in so doing, failed to offer a satisfactorily comprehensive alternative. As a result, both lines of thought rested upon reductionist foundations. What was needed was a renewed theological account of Christian education and a corresponding educational method.

By 1987, after receiving criticism that his own model of education lacked a systematic theoretical framework, Westerhoff began to articulate catechesis as the interrelation of three components – instruction, education and formation – which stood in contrast to the reductionist focus on instruction characteristic of the schooling paradigm.³³ At one point, he described their relationship using the metaphor of building construction:

Formation implies 'shaping' and refers to intentional, relational, experiential activities within the life of a story-formed faith community. *Education* implies 'reshaping' and refers to critical reflective activities related to these communal experiences. And *instruction* implies 'building' and refers to the means by which knowledge and skills useful to communal life are transmitted, acquired and understood. Formation forms the body of Christ, education reforms it, and instruction builds it up.³⁴

Instruction remained important, for it consisted of the basic elements of what was taught – the content of belief and practice. By itself, however, instruction was not enough and tended merely to produce 'magna cum laude' atheists.³⁵ Education should rather perform an inquiring and self-critical function, much like the apprenticeship model of Michael Polanyi.³⁶ It should be an ongoing and permanent feature of life, not one identified only with a temporary season in youth. Most important and most neglected, however, was formation. Formation, for Westerhoff,

³⁰Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community: The Church that Makes a Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), p. 1.

³¹Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. 28.

³²John H. Westerhoff III, 'Kerygma v. Didache: Perspectives in the USA', in *Christianity, Society and Education*, ed. J. Ferguson (London: SPCK, 1981), pp. 183–98 [188]: "Since the turn of the century education in liberal, mainline Protestant churches has employed the language of nurture and avoided the issue of conversion."

³³See Westerhoff, 'Formation, Education, Instruction'.

³⁴See Westerhoff, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', p. 581.

³⁵Watson, 'Making Christians: An Interview with John Westerhoff', p. 16.

³⁶See Westerhoff, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', p. 582 for his references to Polanyi. On the importance of Westerhoff's developing a conception in which enculturation and tradition were not only formative but also themselves modes of critical education, see the helpful comments in Jeff Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1994), pp. 92–94.

named the branch of education in which one could learn 'faith' (the perceptions of one's life and work, or 'worldview'), 'character' (one's sense of communal identity and dispositions regarding the good life) and 'consciousness' (the personal-social awareness that guided the will towards certain realizations).³⁷ Formation considers those aspects of learning that have to do with the kind of person the student is becoming. Together, instruction, education and formation make up triangulating and mutually interpreting categories that together constitute catechesis. This understanding of catechesis as a long-term and multi-faceted mode of learning overcame the reductionism of the school-instructional paradigm, itself the offspring of liberal and neo-orthodox educational models.

The Scriptural Critique: From Organic and Production Metaphors to the Biblical Metaphor of Pilgrimage

A second way in which Westerhoff critiqued contemporary education was through his analysis of various metaphors associated with learning.³⁸ In a 1981 work, he parsed two of the most prominent metaphors for contemporary education theory and proposed a third, more biblical, image in their place.³⁹ The first alternative metaphor was the 'classist' metaphor, associated with Locke and Hume, which described education in terms of industrial production. 'The curriculum is like an assembly line, the teacher a skilled technician and the student a valuable piece of raw material.'⁴⁰ The second metaphor, which he associated with Kant and Rousseau, was a Romantic image that emphasized education as a form of natural, organic growth. 'The curriculum is a greenhouse, the teacher a gardener, the student a seed and the process is one of caring for each individual seed so that it might grow naturally into a preselected plant which is known to the gardener and established by nature.'⁴¹

While ostensibly different, both production and organic metaphors shared a similar focus on design and technique. Both metaphors made plausible the curricular, instructional understanding of education and its corresponding obsession with 'learning objectives', techniques for accomplishing objectives and criteria for evaluating success. The curricularization of education, for Westerhoff, was a by-product of prioritizing the social sciences over theological or biblical measures. As a result, contemporary education theories 'turn mysteries into problems, doubts into errors, the unknowable into the yet to be discovered.'⁴² There was no room for the mystery of divine grace in the education models that imagined the task of learning in either the classist or romanticist image.

In place of these metaphors, Westerhoff asserted the image of a journey or pilgrimage to describe catechesis. Westerhoff frequently associated the pilgrimage

³⁷Westerhoff, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', p. 582.

³⁸In this way, he anticipated something of the proposal recently articulated more extensively in David I. Smith and Susan M. Felch, *Teaching and Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). The authors argue that the role of the imagination, and specifically the metaphors used to describe education, matter greatly for how educators approach their work.

³⁹John H. Westerhoff III, 'The Future', in *Faithful Church*, pp. 298–300.

⁴⁰Westerhoff, 'The Future', p. 298.

⁴¹Westerhoff, 'The Future', pp. 298–299.

⁴²Westerhoff, 'The Future', p. 298.

motif as integral to the notion of Christian salvation. As the Israelites were set free from bondage in order to wander the desert as a pilgrim people, so too was the church liberated from sin in order to journey the world as a pilgrim people. Pilgrimage thus named a specifically biblical category, not one drawn from nature or from industry, and which could provide a telos for catechetical education that went beyond the secularizing tendencies of contemporary education. The student is a pilgrim, the teacher a guide and co-pilgrim, and the journey a shared one in community before God. Like the Israelites, the pilgrims on this journey have no control or fixed means of measuring success; rather, they enter into a path towards realizing what God is making them to be: 'Begun at our baptism, it is a journey to fulfilment, to sanctification, to the actualization of a new heaven and new earth.'⁴³ The journey into the pilgrimage of salvation, for Westerhoff, was learned through lived experience; only as one travels along this path can the imprints of God's sanctifying work be surmised.

The critique of the secular metaphors of production and organic growth and their replacement with the biblical motif of journey reveals Westerhoff's appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of catechesis. The metaphors used to understand education and teaching are fundamental in shaping one's perception of what it is the teacher and student are doing. If seen in terms of either a production of goods or as a biological organism, a host of sub- or non-Christian assumptions about education may find their way into the mix. By restoring the biblical image of pilgrimage, the catechist was on surer ground in appreciating the mysterious and graced encounter between God, the student and the teacher, which was not always as calculable and as systematic as the production line or the garden.

The Ecclesial Critique: From Familial Nurture to Ecclesial Enculturation

A final way in which Westerhoff critiqued the school-instructional model was through highlighting the way in which contemporary religious education had become largely unmoored from the church. In place of this structure, he positioned catechesis as a mode of ecclesial enculturation, centred upon the Christian gospel but located in the context of local church communities. In one narration, he lamented the way in which churches had overlooked the personal, Christ-oriented dimension of catechesis, and reduced catechesis to instruction in the catechism – a text, not a practice. Commenting on the etymological roots of the word *catechesis* (from the Greek *kata* and *echo*, meaning to teach or instruct, but literally to echo or resound), Westerhoff explained:

We forgot that the Word we were supposed to echo, in catechesis, was a person – Jesus. What we are supposed to be doing is making or fashioning Christ-like people Now, unfortunately, somewhere along the way we ended up confusing 'catechesis' with 'catechism.' We then called it 'Christian education', associating it primarily with only one piece of what catechesis is: instruction, the teaching of knowledge and skill.⁴⁴

⁴³Westerhoff, 'The Future', p. 300.

⁴⁴Watson, 'Making Christians: An Interview with John Westerhoff', p. 16.

A reorientation of Christian education, for Westerhoff, needed to go beyond substituting a holistic method in place of a reductionist one. The goal, content and method needed to be restructured according to the telos of following Christ and making Christian disciples. This was a key feature distinguishing catechesis from religious education, Christian education or even teaching the catechism. A Christ-oriented practice of catechesis was his answer to the fundamental question raised by Tertullian's conviction that Christians are made, not born.

In accord with this emphasis on Christ as the aim of catechesis was a greater prominence given to the church as the primary locus of catechetical formation, especially the church's liturgical rites. Early in his career, Westerhoff believed in the possibility of re-establishing an ideal 'ecology' of learning, which would include church, family, school, community and extended family. However, as he came to perceive a much deeper level of fragmentation of contemporary society than he once realized, he began to stress more the central role of the church as a needed corrective against the school- and family-centric models of Bushnell, Coe and other liberal educationists. 'While the family will always be a primary context for nurture, the modern family's authority is limited', especially given the way 'complex . . . societal forces impinge upon [the family's] influence.'⁴⁵ Educators, Westerhoff believed, could not rely on the family as the primary site of catechesis. Westerhoff no doubt owed some of this emphasis on the centrality of the church to the postliberal ethos of Duke Divinity School in the 1980s and 1990s (he co-wrote books with Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon), though he rarely made much mention of this influence.⁴⁶ Westerhoff was more apt to describe the influence of church over family as a New Testament theme, one that distinguished Christianity from Judaism. Jesus, after all, had called members 'out of their families and into a new family.'⁴⁷ The relationship between biological family ties and ecclesial ties created 'the first great crisis in the life of the Christian church.'⁴⁸ Paul's message, Westerhoff argued, consisted of convincing Jews that their salvation was not related to bloodlines but to the fellowship of all those who belonged to Christ.⁴⁹

One problem with early liberalism's approach to education was that it assumed a social context in which all citizens were Christians, with an insufficient account of the distinctive nature of the church and the necessity of conversion. The Christian faith, Westerhoff contended, 'necessitates a converted radical community of faith within which to live and grow.'⁵⁰ 'For too long, we have surrendered to the illusion that nurture alone will rekindle the fire of faith. We have expected too much of nurture. Conversions are a necessary part of the process of Christian life.'⁵¹

⁴⁵Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community*, p. 1.

⁴⁶Westerhoff and Willimon, *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle*; John H. Westerhoff III and Stanley Hauerwas, *Schooling Christians: "Holy Experiments" in American Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴⁷Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community*, p. 2.

⁴⁸Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community*, p. 3.

⁴⁹Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community*, p. 3.

⁵⁰Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, p. 40.

⁵¹John H. Westerhoff III, *A Pilgrim People: Learning through the Church Year* (New York: Seabury, 2005), p. 53. On the relationship between nurture and conversion, see Bickford, 'A Humanistic and Historical Analysis', pp. 102–106.

The church marked a distinct community within society, into which one entered through conversion. It would be naïve at best in the late twentieth century to perpetuate a conflation between church and society. However, Westerhoff's criticism of nurture did not dissuade him from appreciating the social and ritualistic aspects of education, which cultivated Christians in the community of the church. As part of his ecclesially centred model of catechesis, Westerhoff accented the relationship between liturgy and catechesis.⁵² Most centrally, catechesis is preparation for the liturgical rite of baptism; this is its most basic purpose. But more broadly conceived, catechesis is a kind of education that makes visible the hidden educative dimensions of the church's life. It is 'the means by which the church seeks to understand faith's requirements for its liturgical life.'⁵³ The task of the church in catechesis is thus to teach initiates why the church lives according to its peculiar inhabitations of time and space.

Westerhoff's appreciation for liturgy, and specifically the ritual dimensions of catechesis, was enhanced by his collaboration with the anthropologist Gwen Kennedy Neville, from whom he learned many important insights from the field of ritual studies.⁵⁴ Westerhoff was particularly impressed with the importance of aesthetics and intuitional learning foregrounded in these disciplines, as was noted above in Westerhoff's critique of Enlightenment-based education metaphors. From his early years at Harvard, moreover, he had begun to appreciate the imaginative and intuitive dimensions of learning. He criticized the way religious education mirrored general education, which prioritized the intellect and 'neglected the intuitional mode of consciousness.'⁵⁵ This was particularly detrimental for catechesis because of the way it reduced catechesis to another form of content transmission and failed to guide Christians in a life of prayer. For this reason, Westerhoff encouraged his educationists to embrace non-cognitive modes of learning. 'Religious education must not shy away from sense-awareness exercises, imagination games, contemplation or fantasy experiences, and the use of drama, dance, music, and the plastic arts. Concern for the affections ought once again to become a central component of all educational programmes.'⁵⁶ His thoughts on aesthetics were eventually turned into a book on the subject, co-authored with John Eusden in 1998, but throughout his career he recognized the importance of sensory and non-didactic modes of education.⁵⁷

In his approach to catechesis, Westerhoff turned to the church instead of the family as the primary locus for education, while at the same insisting on the nurturing function within the church as an alternative community.⁵⁸ In this way especially, he remained indebted to the liberal emphasis on communal nurture, while incorporating the neo-orthodox critique that stressed conversion into an

⁵²See especially Westerhoff and Neville, *Learning Through Liturgy*; and Westerhoff and Willimon, *Liturgy and Learning through the Life Cycle*.

⁵³Westerhoff, *Learning through Liturgy*, p. 94.

⁵⁴The pair co-wrote two books: *Generation to Generation* and *Learning through Liturgy*.

⁵⁵John H. Westerhoff, 'Learning and Prayer', *Religious Education* 70 (1975), pp. 605–618 (609, 614).

⁵⁶Westerhoff, 'Learning and Prayer', pp. 609, 614.

⁵⁷John Dykstra Eusden and John W. Westerhoff III, *Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998).

⁵⁸Westerhoff, 'Kerygma v. Didache', p. 189.

alternative community. Westerhoff saw catechesis primarily as a way to move beyond the impasse these two approaches had created.

Conclusion: A Retrieval of What?

Westerhoff's appeal to catechesis as a contribution to the field of Christian education offers an important, though perhaps underappreciated, model of church-based theological education. His prominent role in both academic and ecclesial institutions, along with a prolific literary output and leadership in religious education networks, makes him a noteworthy voice in Christian education circles. His understanding of Christian education as catechesis took stock of both liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, even as he was critical of their respective shortcomings. He lamented these traditions' polarizations of nurture versus conversion, piety versus prophecy, social versus individual and immanence versus transcendence. Westerhoff's rehabilitation of the language of catechesis was meant to provide integration to the fractious approaches to education in the twentieth century. From a historical perspective, Westerhoff's contribution is significant for the eclectic means by which sought to appropriate the early Christian concept of catechesis as means of addressing needs that resulted from the liberal/neo-orthodox divide.

For all these noteworthy achievements, his deployment of catechesis was not, it seems, what might be called a retrieval or *ressourcement* of catechesis. While there are scattered references to patristic authors, such as Tertullian's line about being 'made, not born', there is little sustained or in-depth engagement with patristic writings on catechesis. While he used the language of catechesis, the substance of what he meant by that term remained within the vocabulary of religious education discussions of the mid-twentieth century, especially as those circles were dominated by the context of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. As such, his vision of catechesis remains limited by the imaginative scope set forth between those two poles. It is unclear whether there is a certain distrust in the actual language and grammar of patristic writers, or whether he thought such attention would be lost on his primary interlocutors, who were not patristic scholars, or even theologians primarily, but educationists. But whatever the reason, there appears a certain absence of deep engagement with patristic sources, even as Westerhoff sought to rehabilitate the notion of catechesis. By contrast, theologians like Jean Daniélou or Josef Jungmann, who also drew upon the language of catechesis as means contemporary theological renewal, had much more facility with the language and writings of patristic authors to sketch out the contours of a mode of Christian education that would sustain the church in the future.⁵⁹ The fluency of these authors with patristic sources gives their writing a different tenor, a different grammar, one that, I would argue, provides a genuinely new vision of theological education, and not only a way of integrating the strengths of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, theologians today, especially in Anglican circles, have more to be grateful for than critical of with respect to Westerhoff's appeal to catechesis. His work remains generative for churches and Christian educators today who would seek to develop a robust notion of introducing new believers into the faith, capturing

⁵⁹On these figures and movement, see note 5.

key insights from contemporary education theory, while remaining critical of their presuppositions through recourse to pre-modern Christian practice. As Westerhoff sought to reconcile liberal and neo-orthodox approaches to education, rather than propose a radical critique through the recovery of an ancient practice of catechesis, his writing models a generous approach to the recent and distant past, proposing catechesis as a comprehensive, biblical, and ecclesially centred practice. In this, he has much to offer Christian educators today who desire to bypass old divisions and chart a more expansive vision of Christian learning and formation.