

Educating for freedom

by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

*God's Wisdom: Toward a Theology of Education*, by Peter C. Hodgson

In the rush to reform our schools, many people are realizing that education is an essentially religious process. Though there are still polarized debates about vouchers, prayer, evolution and the constitutional separation of church and state, a surprising number of people agree that education is more than just the technique of transferring information. A revival is sweeping the nation, but it is the schools, not the churches, that are longing for dramatic change.

Various factions in this revival chant diverse but related mantras summing up their hopes for education: the transmission of culture, the formation of character, the development of civic responsibility, and the cultivation of multiple kinds of intelligence. These formulae have in common the sense that education involves transcendent values and moral commitment. But if we are to find a common ground for the relationship between religion and education, we must ask not only what education is for, but also what the nature of religion is.

Peter Hodgson steps into these debates with a theological interpretation of education. His primary goal is not to defend the role of religion in the classroom, although that might be a byproduct of his position. Rather, he is trying to understand the educational process as a whole from a religious perspective. If his position is viable, it might provide a common vocabulary for the various factions trying to revitalize education. If, as I think, his position is problematic, then we might be forced to rethink the current educational reforms in order to find another way to match education and religion.

Hodgson's book is deceptively brief and simple. A professor of theology at Vanderbilt University, Hodgson is best known as a scholar of Hegel, and a simplified version of Hegel's thought guides this work. The book begins with an account of the religious dimension of all teaching. Education is one of the great mysteries of life, a process that creates by destroying, and brings social renewal by marking the passage from

youth to adulthood. Although the Greeks, Hebrews and early Christians all said different things about education, they all sought the wisdom that God grants through God's nurturing spirit. Like Hegel, Hodgson looks for similarities rather than differences. He draws different strands of educational theory into one vast vision of how God works through history as the Spirit that uplifts and guides human thought.

After surveying ancient and modern theories of education, Hodgson develops his own position. His thesis is that the paideutic power of God enables education to reach its most radical potential. Jesus is one way of naming that power, which exists in all of us. Hodgson divides education into three elements: critical thinking, heightened imagination and liberating practice. These elements are present in education whether God is explicitly named or not. Religious language merely deepens and strengthens them. The book's conclusion suggests ways in which this approach to religion can draw together religious studies and theology. They need each other if theology is to be critical and religious studies engaging.

For Hodgson, education is for the promotion of freedom, and religion is one way of naming the inherent dynamic—found in both individuals and history—that inevitably propels humans toward liberation. Freedom is such a universal ideal that it is hard to pick an argument with Hodgson. Nevertheless, there are other goals for education. An emphasis on freedom points education in the direction of a politicized critique of the status quo and a celebration of diversity, so that people can do their own thing. If, by contrast, the formation of character were considered the point of education, then the resulting instruction in the virtues would have to take place in the context of a stronger appreciation for community and tradition.

Hodgson assumes that education merely needs to liberate students' spirits. In this scenario, institutional religion is seen as a barrier to their expressive individualism, although their journey toward freedom is itself essentially spiritual. If one assumes instead, with the Christian tradition, that students are mired in sin, then their liberation demands a transformation. They need to be immersed in a tradition that can empower them to become something other than what they already are.

Hodgson talks about education in moving and insightful ways that will appeal to all educators. Perhaps, however, that is the problem. In trying to reach the broadest audience, he trims Christianity to fit into his general theory of pedagogy. It is hard to find anything specifically religious in the book. Christianity makes no difference to

education here because Christianity is no different from any other religion. This seems a heavy price to pay for a theological interpretation of pedagogy.

The alternative would be to think of education as a confrontation with new ideas. Christianity could then be presented in all of its depth and uniqueness as a challenge that demands to be considered on its own terms. Rather than baptizing education with religious sentiment, theologians should seek to carve out a space in the classroom for Christian voices in all of their particularity and singularity. By contrast, developing a theological account of education in general seems like a more ambitious but less challenging option.