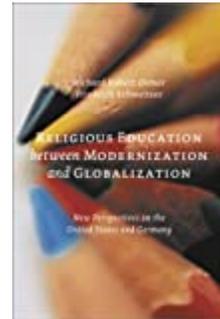




**Richard R. Osmer, Friedrich Schweitzer.** *Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003. xiii + 316 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-1284-1.



**Reviewed by** Doerte Muench (Department of Religious Education, University of Erfurt, Germany)

**Published on** H-German (January, 2005)

## Religious Education and Its Twenty-First-Century Challenges

Richard R. Osmer, Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary (United States), and Friedrich Schweitzer, Professor of Practical Theology and Religious Education at the University of Tuebingen (Germany), offer a methodically innovative comparative approach to the task of religious education nowadays by using the great transformation of societies in the western world as a framework for their analysis and further questions (p. 29). Although a lot of comparative approaches remain superficial, this elaborate and convincing book does not, and its readers will be enriched in different ways.

From the reviewer's German perspective, this tandem work integrates and connects current questions to a wider perspective on the theory of religious education, for instance, as Schweitzer's publications of the last years show.[1] German approaches to international religious education are often limited to a European context. Unlike religious education in the United States, most European countries make some arrangement for religious education in schools. Despite this important difference, however, the world of religious diversity suggests many sim-

ilar questions for studying both contexts.[2] From their countries' different perspectives, Osmer and Schweitzer locate the context of religious education in relationship to general education, but also to the church, to the family, and to the individual. For the twentieth century, the authors chose to compare religious education in three periods: a period of reform movements (1900-1930), a period of postwar renewal (1945-1960) and a period of changes starting in the 1960s. They have left out German National Socialism because there is no concrete parallel in the United States, although the authors would see its relevance to comparative research and their main thesis in a more abstract way (pp. 77-79).

The book's title is programmatic, bearing in mind the guiding principle of a relationship between theological tradition and the cultural and social transformations of modernization, globalization, and postmodernism. Osmer and Schweitzer start with the so-called contemporary "crisis" of churches and Christianity. In this atmosphere, congregations must persuade their youth that religious traditions still have significance. According to the authors, "contemporary Protestant churches in the West-

ern world are having tremendous difficulty carrying out this task” (p. xii). Osmer and Schweitzer describe the increasing separation between the church and public education while the distance to the family as an important site of religious education is growing, too (pp. xiv-xvii). Their main question is how to deal with the challenges of religious education in the twenty-first century in order to overcome its lack of an identity-shaping moral ethos (pp. xvii-xix).

According to the authors, the expression “religious education” includes not only a theological but also a pedagogical kind of thinking about religion and its tasks without ignoring the tension between both. The relationship between theology and education is viewed as dialectical and also dialogical, asking whether “general and religious education should be viewed as two complementary halves that, together, produce a meaningful whole” (pp. 6-9). Due to their comparative perspective the authors outline their idea of religious education as incorporating educational programs of Christian congregations *and* religious education at school. Osmer and Schweitzer approach the subject comparatively, because the influence of modernization, globalization, and post-modernism supersedes national borders (p. 6). Their aim is a deeper understanding of how these issues affect the social context in which religious education takes place. The first part is dedicated to this social context and the analysis of these transformations.

Part two then turns to important ideas about religious education and presents a fresh reading of influential ideas. Osmer and Schweitzer offer a close look at how such materials relate to the situation of society: “We hope to do justice to the individual authors’ perceptions by asking how they perceived their work in relationship to society and culture at their own time, but we also want to go beyond their own perspective by asking, from our own point of view, how and if they were successful in facing up to the challenges of their particular time and of social modernization in general” (p. 76). American and German characteristics and approaches of each period are compared and discussed.

The authors suggest that in the first period of religious education discussed, reform movements were characterized by an exchange between both countries: books were translated, the number of international conferences increased. In both countries historical and cultural processes were loosed from traditional religious authority. Religious educators were forced to reflect on a situation in which the connection between church and state had

become difficult. In Germany, for example, Friedrich Niebergall made efforts to establish religious education in public schools that was to be separated from church-based education, while George A. Coe in the United States supported a modern approach to religious education within congregations without much considering public education. As in general pedagogy, the child had been discovered as a new focus of religious education, and in both countries the practice of religious education became increasingly professionalized, too. But Osmer and Schweitzer also note the ways in which political implications of religious education in each country could be quite different. Despite the different starting positions after World War II, certain similarities cross national borders. Soon after 1945, the exchange of literature and students continued. Religious educators like Helmuth Kittel with his “evangelical instruction,” like James Smart (who followed Barth) or Lewis Joseph Sherrill (who followed Tillich) were somehow responding to a common set of issues: “(1) a sense that early promise of modernity had failed in the face of two world wars, global economic depression, the spread of nuclear arms, and various totalitarian threats to democracy and (2) a sense that the church and religious education had been over-accommodating to modernity, both culturally and intellectually, and needed to recover their own theological identity” (pp. 162-163). Both national differences and similarities due to transformations with supranational effects will thus support Osmer and Schweitzer’s guiding thesis.

From 1960 onwards, international cooperation seemed to become more and more relevant (p. 203). Apart from this trend, Osmer and Schweitzer identify further a new dimension of pluralism that religious education was confronted with, a heretofore unknown spirit of ecumenicism, a realization of transformation and change that required new forms of religious education, and the increasing obviousness of the need for dialogue with the social sciences. It was not solely modernization that constituted the key for comparative analysis, but also the development of globalization. Due to new immigrant populations, for example, pluralism took on a strong influence. National reactions in the United States and Germany differed from each other. John H. Westerhoff, who “represents a communitarian form of response,” was anxious to save and stabilize Christian identity while Karl Ernst Nipkow looked for cultural possibilities and values in which the church had a stake (p. 207). Here, the reader encounters a similar constellation to the challenges Coe and Niebergall faced during the

early twentieth century. In the authors' focused historical comparison, which delineates generalizable patterns comparable between Germany and the United States, the reader can discern how the relationship between general social movements and religious education has arranged itself.

Part three of the book turns to the challenges of the twenty-first century. In view of the processes influencing issues in religious education, the authors pinpoint four guiding trends as religious education looks towards the twenty-first century: (1) religious education has become an academic discipline, unfortunately addressing most of the time only professionals; (2) due to globalization, Protestant religion has become one congregation among others; (3) one important task of religious education is to be a mediator between theology and the cultural issues of modernity; and (4) religious education has developed a high degree of diversity and cross-disciplinary exchange (pp. 211-213). After considering the most useful frameworks for religious education from a historical perspective, here the authors remind their readers of religious education's role in general education (the *paideia* of society), the church, the family, and the individual (p. 213).

The United States and Germany are currently following different strategies in this regard, as they have done for some time: the former focuses on religious education on the level of congregation, while the latter concentrates on religious education at school. But, the authors propose, because they deal with the same problems, they should learn from each other in exchange. The relationship between theology and education in general, and religious education as a part of it, remains tense. Here, it might have been helpful for the authors to take into consideration the East German concept of Christian education developed by the church during the GDR period and its discussion about religious education at school since 1990.

Osmer and Schweitzer stand up for a new level of

discourse which goes beyond churches and institutions. They consider religion still important to people living under effects of modernization, globalization, and postmodernism. Chances lie in offering and keeping open a religious dimension apart from a particular denomination. Religious educators should be interested in the needs of the individual persons and their religious development. They should rediscover the family as an important audience of religious education.

As a reader and reviewer, I appreciated the authors' outstanding approach and constructive proposals. They use special terms precisely and effectively integrate and distinguish their ideas from generally accepted theories. The extensive bibliography on paradigmatic figures and texts is also useful. Through its comparative method this book is not only relevant for looking closely at Protestantism and its challenges but for the challenge of religion in general.

#### Notes

[1]. Friedrich Schweitzer, *Identität und Entwicklung in der Religionspädagogik (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Freiburg, 2004)*; *idem*, Postmoderner Lebenszyklus und Religion. Eine Herausforderung für Kirche und Theologie (Götersloh: Götersloher Verlagshaus, 2003); *idem*, Pädagogik und Religion. Eine Einführung (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003); *idem*, Entwurf einer pluralitätstfähigen Religionspädagogik (Götersloh: Götersloher Verlagshaus, 2002); Hans-Georg Ziebertz, *Religious Education in a Plural Western Society. Problems and Challenges* (Münster: LIT, 2003).

[2]. Ulrich Hemel, "Religionspädagogik im internationalen Vergleich," in *Neues Handbuch religionspädagogischer Grundbegriffe*, ed. G. Bitter, R. Engler, G. Miller, K. E. Nipkow (Munich: Koesel, 2002); Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Christoph Th. Scheilke, Peter Schreiner, eds., *Towards Religious Competence. Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe* (Münster: LIT, 2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Doerte Muench. Review of Osmer, Richard R.; Schweitzer, Friedrich, *Religious Education Between Modernization and Globalization: New Perspectives on the United States and Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10171>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).