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Solidarity in the Field of Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the field of religious education can have a clearer sense of identity if religious educators recognize the threads of historical continuity in the field and forge bonds of greater unity in our professional guild by adopting a shared commitment to explore various modes of religious learning as expressions of the universal human quest for meaning, value, and understanding. To provide a vision for and direction within the field, we recommend religious educators adopt the guiding image of standing in solidarity with one another at the crossroads of religion and education and research and practice.

KEYWORDS

Religious education research; religious education practice; religious education identity; conceptualizing religious education

"I propose the image of a crossroads, which unifies theory and practice at its center.... Picture the professional religious educator as an agent on the horizontal road, traversing the intersection [with theory/research]. He or she is committed to live (walk back and forth on the street of human experience) with the mass of the people, constantly crossing the theoretical street and conceptualizing there with them. In this immersion the religious educator is in tune with the source of divine revelation—the religious experiences of the people." (O’Gorman 1988, 325)

In a 2021 *Religious Education* editorial, Aaron Ghiloni commented that "the field [of religious education] is headachingly diverse" (320). He pointed out that it is international, multireligious, and interdisciplinary and includes work in the form of academic articles, case studies, hermeneutical analyses, mediations, and interviews. Religious education research also explores a variety of religious educational theories and practices as it addresses issues of faith formation in faith communities for children, youth, and adults (including Bible study, instruction in Christian beliefs and doctrines, sacramental preparation, and opportunities for ongoing spiritual renewal) and education in schools and other contexts worldwide.

Ghiloni’s editorial suggests questions that have been asked in the field of religious education since the mid-twentieth century: "What is religious education?" and "Who are we?" – with *we* referring to what Robert O’Gorman identified as professional religious educators, that is, researchers and practitioners focused on education about religion and in and for religious understanding and, in some instances, religious belief. (For examples of discussions of the identity of religious education as a field and who

we are as religious educators, see Westerhoff 1978, 1–22; O’Gorman 1988; O’Gorman 2015).

Ghiloni’s comment that religious education is headachingly diverse reflects one of the ways questions about religious education as a field and profession have been addressed. We can view religious education as a headache, more precisely, as a field that is so diverse that we get a headache when we try to think about what, if anything, gives structure, meaning, and identity to the field and the work of professional religious educators. From this perspective, just as we are likely to want to get rid of a headache as quickly as possible, we should limit our efforts to conceptualize religious education as a field of academic inquiry.

There are other ways of thinking about religious education. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the option already mentioned, we can conceptualize religious education as a field with a distinct identity in which there are connections between the diverse efforts of professional religious educators. In his editorial, Ghiloni indicates that he recognizes this way of viewing religious education when he points out that while the field of religious education is diverse, it is not disjointed. He contends that *Religious Education* preserves the core identity of the field through its commitment to “inquire into the educational dimensions of religion and the religious dimensions of education” (320).

Because of the differing and conflicting ways questions about religious education as a field and profession have and can be addressed, they are still important questions to consider today. Most notably, religious educators teaching and mentoring master’s and doctoral students in religious education and students studying to be practitioners and researchers in the field should consider these questions seriously as a grounding for their efforts. In this article, we address these questions and argue for the adoption of the second of the two options outlined here: envisioning or imagining religious education as a distinct field of study with a sense of identity that connects the diverse efforts of religious educators to address concerns about education in faith in a wide variety of contexts.

As seen from a broad pastoral perspective, religious educators encounter the beautiful messiness of human existence at the crossroads of everyday experience and research in religion and education. In standing within these crossroads, we take on a two-fold task. First, as people attentive to religious experiences, we direct people’s attention to how the divine dwells within our complex, life-sustaining, yet often fraught human interactions. Second, as educators, we highlight how the crossroads of life can be a place of learning, discovery, and personal and social transformation. We suggest that religious educators’ commitment to this two-fold task provides a unifying center and distinct identity to the field of religious education. The article seeks to contribute to the field of religious education by drawing greater attention to the uniqueness of religious education as a historically continuous field of research and practice and the need for religious educators to ground their work more intentionally in this distinct field.

Before turning to our analysis of religious education as a field and profession, we offer some background comments to indicate how our life and work shape our research. I, Harold Daly Horell, am a committed Christian who has, for the past 25 years, been teaching courses in religious education at US Catholic universities.

I, Jeniffer Fresy Porielly Wowor, have been teaching courses in *Pendidikan Kristiani* (Christian Education) at a Christian university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for nine years

and have served as an ordained pastor of the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia since 2008. I am now pursuing my Ph.D. in Religious Education. I work in a religiously pluralistic context and recognize the importance of Christians learning their faith deeply and engaging in mutual dialog with people from other religious traditions.

I, Eric Olaf Olsen, have served as a parish-based religious educator for over three decades. My passionate commitment to equipping people to live their faith actively and lovingly began when I taught a high school Sunday school class. It continued to grow after my ordination to the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

I, Shaina E. Turner Franklin, am an educator, religious educator, and educational administrator with many years of experience teaching and ministering with young people within and beyond school and faith community settings. I am a doctoral student in religious education.

While Harold (Bud) Horell took the lead in writing this article, its development was a collaborative venture. The central ideas emerged in conversations we had in a Research Methods in Religious Education course about the commitment of religious educators to work at the intersection of research, practice, religion, and education. We then refined our insights in our work together after the course ended.

Conceptualizing religious education

Turning again to a focus on the field of religious education, the earliest known use of the term *religious education* may have been by US Unitarians in the 1860s (Moran 2000, 135). The term was introduced in academic circles in 1903 by William Rainey Harper, the founder of the Religious Education Association (REA), and the academics he enlisted to develop religious education as a field of scholarly inquiry. Harper and his colleagues envisioned the field of religious education as a clearing house where Christians and people of other faiths could gather to share research and practical insights about faith formation in faith communities and a variety of religious organizations, educating about the role of religion in public life, and interdisciplinary research focused on the intersection of the fields of religious studies/theology and education (Harper 1903).

From the beginning, some scholars and practitioners attracted to the field of religious education found that it was difficult to conceptualize what religious education is as a field of study. Stated more pointedly, they have found thinking about religious education to be headache-inducing. Additionally, from the mid-twentieth century to the present, the most common way of getting rid of a religious education headache among Christians has been to use the term *religious education* to refer to a broad area of scholarly interest while claiming Christian education and practical theology as fields of study. From this perspective, religious education is only a field of study in a metaphorical sense. Saying "religious education is a field of study" is like saying "she's got a heart of gold." It indicates that religious education is valuable as an area of study that draws insight from scholarship in education and related fields and infuses a concern for the education of humans as humans into the theory of practice of education in Christian faith.

For example, in "Religious Education as a Discipline," D. Campbell Wyckoff posited religious education is an "aspect of education" (1978, 173). He thought religious educators should draw insight from past and present research in education to explore

how to foster human flourishing. Wyckoff also contended that religious educators focus specifically on revelation, with Christian religious educators attending to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, "religious education is sharpened and corrected when it becomes Christian education" (174).

According to Wyckoff, "the Christian educator cannot escape being in addition a theologian (176)," and in particular "a practical theologian" (173) because their concern is with fostering a Christian understanding of life. Thus, Wyckoff states, "Religious education as a discipline is an inquiry into teaching and learning as modes and means of response to revelation" (1978, 173). Yet, for Wyckoff, religious education is only a discipline of study in a metaphorical sense. It is, in reality, an area of interest among some practical theologians rather than a fully developed field of scholarly inquiry. However, Wyckoff did express the hope that over time, religious educators would create "a set of categories" to provide a comprehensive framework, which he described as a "total education" perspective, for understanding education in faith in all contexts and, thus, provide a grounding for religious education as a distinct field of study (177). Today, many religious educators have given up on this hope because of the headaching diversity in religious education theory and practice. They identify themselves as Christian educators and practical theologians, as practical theologians with an interest in education or pedagogy, or in some other way that indicates an interest in both theology and education. They use the term religious educators in a metaphorical way to refer to a scholarly interest in drawing insight from various fields of academic inquiry, including education, in exploring issues of faith formation framed by a broad or universal concern for educating toward human flourishing.

Jennifer Ayres echoes Wyckoff's understanding of religious education in her recent book *Inhabittance: Ecological Religious Education*. Ayres argues that to address the problems created by excessive individualism, "unrestrained industrialization," and "an uncritical embrace of technology" (Ayres 2019, 4), educators and religious educators must nurture an ecological consciousness and ecological imagination that can provide a foundation for efforts to consider how humans do and should interact with other living beings within the ecosystem that is our home, our habitat. Ayres is concerned with how "humans can be moved to have a sense of responsibility for protecting ecosystems" (3). She advocates for educating people to be "biotic citizens" (51). She also discusses "ecological faith" and educating Christians to live well and responsibly in God's world (53). Because it shows how educators and religious educators can nurture greater awareness of the environmental crisis as the most pressing socio-moral issue of our times, Ayres' book makes a significant contribution to religious education.

However, Ayres' book also contributes to the ongoing difficulties in conceptualizing the field of religious education and who we are as religious educators. First, while Ayres does identify herself as a religious educator, she does not situate *Inhabittance* in relation to other work in the field of religious education. Ayres does not comment on scholarly work focused specifically on religious education for environmental sustainability, such as O'Gorman, K. (1992 and 2007), Dalton (1997), and Hallman (2000). When Ayres discusses the communal dimension of education, her conversation partners are secular educators. She does not engage the extensive literature in religious education on the communal aspects of education within and beyond faith communities (see, for example, Harris 1989; Foster 2006). Second, Ayres does not offer a clear account of the

relationship between religious education and Christian education. Instead, at some points, she discusses religious education as a broadly inclusive effort to educate persons of faith and conscience for environmental responsibility. At other points, Ayres adopts a specifically Christian perspective, which she indicates using such phrases as "religious education in the broad Christian tradition" (43). Overall, *Inhabittance* adds to the disconnected and headachingly diverse body of work in religious education. In the book, Ayres does not offer a clear, coherent, and consistent understanding of religious education as a field of academic inquiry, including a sense of how she envisions religious education in relation to Christian education and practical theology.

Fortunately, the understanding of religious education outlined by Wyckoff and presumed today by Ayres and many other religious educators is not our only option. The founders of the REA and the first two generations of professional religious educators envisioned religious education as a unified field of practice and scholarly inquiry that is ecumenical and interreligious and that explores issues of formation in faith within faith communities and other religious organizations and education about the role of religion in society. (For an account of the first several generations of religious educators, see Boys 1989, 39–65. Boys refers to them as liberal religious educators.) In more recent times, the founding vision of the field of religious education has been rearticulated and refashioned for modern times by religious educators such as Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran (Moran 1974; Moran 2016, 214–232; Harris and Moran 1998) and Kieran Scott (1984). From the perspective of the modern reconceptualization of the original founding vision of the REA, religious education can be viewed as a historically continuous field of academic inquiry from the early twentieth century to the present, with the field being centered on the interplay between religion and education in addressing a broad range of concerns about religious meaning and value within faith communities and societies.

Gabriel Moran provided a paradigmatic expression of a refashioned understanding of the original vision of religious education in "The Intersection of Religion and Education" (1974). Like Wyckoff, Moran adopted "revelation" as a critical term of analysis, and as a Christian, he was concerned with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (533). However, Moran recognized that "religious meaning" is revealed in many beliefs, practices, rituals, and other human experiences. Thus, he was concerned with developing a religious language "that Christianity can contribute to but which Christianity does not own" (531). From Moran's perspective, the constituents of the field of religious education are, first and foremost, religious educators. Since all religious educators ground their perspectives in some religious community or stance, religious educators are also Christian educators, Catholic educators, Jewish educators, or Islamic educators, or they ground their scholarship and practice in some other specific religious perspective.

Moran, like Wyckoff, posited that an educational perspective should focus on fostering human flourishing and the fullness of human life. However, Wyckoff viewed the relationship between Christianity as a religion and education as one-directional, with Christian perspectives sharpening and correcting educational and religious educational outlooks. In contrast, Moran envisioned religion and education as being dialectical. That is, religious education "from the side of religion" challenges "the quality and purpose of all education, and from the side of religion" challenges "existing religious institutions with the test of education" (532).

On the religious side, religious education can expand and deepen educational inquiry by raising questions of ultimate meaning and value. On the educational side, religious education can prompt critical questioning that can foster resistance to the inadequacies of expressions of religious meaning and forms of religious instruction that are "ecclesial thought control of children." It can also encourage protests of expressions of religious meaning that bring a false sense of closure to "life, education, and the imagination" (537). Among the examples of fruitful avenues of religious education inquiry, Moran names the women's and ecological movements. In addressing them, religious educators as educators can nurture questioning that includes but goes beyond ethical and social considerations and raises issues of ultimate meaning and value. As people of faith, they can challenge their particular faith communities and call all people of faith to reflect on sexism and the destruction of the Earth's ecosystem as pressing social issues from a faith perspective.

Before proceeding further, we consider an objection to the line of argumentation we have presented. In a recent conversation, a colleague commented that they thought tracing the history of religious education to William Rainey Harper and the founding of the REA was fraught, that is, that it had undesirable consequences. This objection draws our attention to the limitations of the original vision of the field. Undeniably, many of the founders of the REA espoused problematic Christian and Western or American imperialist views. They thought Western culture, US social and political structures, and Christianity were superior to other cultural and social outlooks and religions (Gunn 2022). The first several generations of religious educators also failed to explore the relationship between education and the perpetuation of racism in the United States (Moy 2000). Additionally, some early religious educators were concerned about gender equality. Still, men dominated the field until the last quarter of the twentieth century, and questions of gender equality were not raised as frequently or sharply as they could have been (Schmidt 1983, 41, 46, 95–96; and Keely 1997, 1–4).

Despite the limited perspectives of Harper and his colleagues, to develop a complete understanding of religious education as a field of scholarly inquiry, we must trace the term *religious education* in academic circles back to the founding of the REA. The scholars who identified as religious educators in the first few decades of the twentieth century established religious education as an area of scholarly inquiry. Without their groundbreaking academic and practical efforts, the theory and practice of religious education would most likely be far less developed than it is today. Moreover, in the early twentieth century, the first generation of religious educators created a spiritual or religious movement that helped bring the social sciences into the pastoral or practical arts of ministry. Before this time, faith formation, preaching, pastoral care, and other pastoral arts were often seen as applied fields, that is, as fields that lacked scholarly grounding and focused only on applying the insights of systematic theological inquiry. When religious education emerged as a field of study at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was one of the first fields to combine concerns for pastoral practice and rigorous scholarly inquiry and to understand the relation between theory and practice in religious education fully; we need to have a sense of how the two were seen as being intertwined at the time religious education emerged as a field of study (Schmidt 1983, 5–7; Hoover 2019, 10).

Additionally, at the time of the founding of the REA, the term *religious education* was used to express an expansive, ecumenical, and interfaith outlook, and to understand fully the expansive religious openness in the field, we must trace the use of the term *religious education* back to its use in the religious education movement in the early twentieth century. To explain more fully, the religious climate in many parts of the world, including the United States, was tumultuous in the first decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, as Boys points out, from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, "religion was increasingly relegated to the periphery of the culture" (1989, 44). On the other hand, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, influential religious and spiritual renewal initiatives reshaped the world's religious landscape. Most notably, the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago launched the modern interfaith movement. The 1906 to 1915 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles sparked the religious renewal that eventually led Pentecostalism to become a worldwide religious phenomenon. The 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference was a primary influence in developing the Protestant Christian ecumenical movement. In Roman Catholicism, Pope Leo's *Spectata fides* (1885) contributed to the renewal of Catholic education, and his *Rerum novarum* (1891) paved the way for Catholic laity and clergy to become more involved in efforts to address pressing socio-moral issues in the light of their faith.

Liberal theology developed in Europe and the United States to respond to the more fluid expressions of religious beliefs and practices that emerged in the last years of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries (Ahlstrom 2004, 763–784). Liberal theologians emphasized the imminent presence of God in human personal and social life, the importance of human freedom (including religious freedom), and the human capacity for altruistic action. The religious education movement became a "vital element" of liberal theology because of its focus on religious and moral education as a way of nurturing a sense of God's presence in everyday life and activating the capacity for altruistic action through efforts to foster care for others and a commitment to seeking the common good of society (Ahlstrom 2004, 781). Many of the first several generations of religious educators grounded their professional outlooks in liberal theology. However, even when religious educators have grounded their outlooks in other theological stances, they have tended to retain the expansive, ecumenical, interfaith, and open spirit of liberal theology. Thus, we can develop a richer understanding of the open and responsive religious outlook expressed by the term *religious education*, and, as a result, be better able to consider the use of the term today by tracing its use back to the founding of the REA in 1903 and the emergence of the religious education movement.

Returning to a focus on the present, among the most pressing questions for religious educators to consider today are: Can we show how there has been a clear line of development in the field of religious education from the founding of the REA to the present? If we can do so, can we also provide a way of making sense of what appears to be the headaching diversity in religious education today? We address these questions in the remainder of the article. In doing so, we begin in the next section by turning to the founder of the REA, William Rainey Harper.

Research, practice, and the scope and purpose of religious education

William Rainey Harper reflected on the scope and purpose of religious education as a field of practice and scholarship at the REA's founding convention in Chicago in 1903. He envisioned the field as having a vast, expanding scope and a unifying center. In commenting on its scope, Harper suggested that religious education practice and research should focus on "educational work" concerning church art, architecture, music, and education in faith in Sunday schools and Christian associations for young people (232–233). Beyond faith communities, religious education should be concerned with religious and moral education in public schools (234, 237). On an even broader level, Harper contended that religious educators should seek "to indicate the part which religion should perform in the development of the individual and society" (237–238). According to Harper, the unifying purpose of all practical work and research in religious education is to make important and new "contributions to the cause of religious and moral education" (237). Harper thought this purpose could be achieved through a broad range of practical and scholarly inquiries that united people from various life contexts interested in the correlation of religion and education (231–232).

Harper envisioned research in religious education as taking place through intertwining "practical experiments" and "scientific investigations," such as applying various methods of religious and moral instruction in a specific educational setting and then utilizing scientific observation to evaluate the results (238). He suggested that religious education researchers should use the resources of the many subfields in religion and education. These included, on the one hand, the various theological disciplines, with Harper emphasizing "modern Bible study" and the study of the Bible in Sunday schools. On the other, educational research, namely "modern psychology" (that is, educational psychology) and "modern pedagogy," should inform research in religious education (237). (For a discussion of Harper and religious education, see Gunn 2022.)

A 1923 *Religious Education* forum on "What Makes Education Religious" provides a noteworthy example of how, in the early decades of the twentieth century, religious educators remained united in exploring the intertwining of religion, education, practice, and research in educating for religious understanding. Three of the best-known university professors of religious education of that time contributed to the forum: Arthur Bennett, George Herbert Betts, and Luther Weigle (Betts et al., 1923). All three affirmed that the correlation of religion and education in practice and theory is needed to provide a central, unifying purpose for religious education. For example, Bennett contended that there must be a "direct reference to the needs of religion," including references in Christian schools to "the Christian ideal" by teachers who profess and model this ideal when faith communities and schools select curricular materials. At the same time, schools should accept "the findings of scientific pedagogies," that is, the latest educational research should inform educational processes (89). Weigle argued that there was a need for "a better integration of religion and education" to avoid "two great dangers" – "a merely secular education" and "non-educational religion" (91–92).

Bennett's, Betts', and Weigle's contributions to the "What Makes Education Religious" forum also illustrate how, in addition to the underlying unity in the field, religious education continued to expand as religious educators grounded their work in diverse theological stances. Bennett, like Harper, envisioned religious education as focusing

on the development of religious consciousness and, in so doing, directing persons and society toward "religious idealism," that is, how to live according to religious ideals in society (88). Bennett's outlook is grounded in Christian liberal theology, specifically in beliefs in the imminent presence of God in personal and social life and the human capacities for altruistic action and to care for the common good of society. Turning to Betts, he argued that religious education should be concerned with developing religion as a reconstructive force in society. Betts' theological outlook was shaped by the Christian Social Gospel movement's commitment to fostering social reconstruction to make God's transformative presence more fully known in society.

Lastly, Weigle argued for "evangelism through religious education," that is, for religious education that meets "the world's needs" by utilizing education as a "method" that makes the Gospel of Jesus Christ a practical part of life. He emphasized the importance of what Elmer Homrighausen called the "theological undergirding" of religious education (Homrighausen 1938, 235). Weigle's approach prefigured Randolph Crump Miller's call to place theology at the center of religious education, with education providing methods of teaching theology (Miller 1953), and D. Campbell Wyckoff's call for religious educators to identify themselves as Christian practical theologians (1967). It also helped to set the stage for the emergence of religious education re-envisioned as Christian education rooted in Neo-Orthodox theology and explorations of religious education grounded in various approaches to theology (see Miller 1995; on Christian education, see also Boys 1989, 66–79). It is significant to note that while mid-twentieth-century religious educators began to ground their work in diverse theological stances, many remained united in their commitment to exploring the intersection of religion and education.

In his REA Biennial Convention address, Harrison Elliott offered a mid-twentieth-century perspective for making sense of religious educators' diverse outlooks, including their theological orientations (1950). As seen from Boys' typology of approaches to religious education, Elliott is a second-generation liberal religious educator (Boys 1989, 55–56). Elliott affirmed that religious educators have remained united by "a common conviction as to the importance of both education and religion" (1950, 196). Yet, Elliott thought about religion and education differently than both Harper and the other founders of the field and those religious educators who had begun to identify themselves as Christian educators.

Harper and his colleagues tended to think of *religion* and *education* as being *univocal*, that is, as terms that have a single meaning. They believed the field would have a secure foundation if religious educators could present the precise meanings of basic terms (see, for example, Votaw 1905). Because no such clear definitions of fundamental terms emerged, some practitioners and researchers thought the field lacked coherence and a clear identity (see a discussion of this issue in Westerhoff 1978, 1–13). Additionally, many scholars and practitioners who identified as Christian educators, such as Wyckoff and Miller, also held that religious education lacked a clear or coherent sense of identity as a field of study. They tended to reduce religious education to Christian education or re-envision education in Christian faith as an academic interest they could pursue within Christian practical theology. In contrast, Elliott's stance can be summarized by saying that he viewed *religion* and *education* as *polyvocal terms* that express *universal dimensions of human living*.

More fully, Elliott recognized that there are many differing voices in the field of religious education because people's religious and educational experiences are shaped by their "religious heritage," their age and stage of human development, and their personalities (198). Yet, he held that particular ways of talking about education and religion could express universal dimensions of human living. At the heart of Elliott's analysis is the idea that profound educational and religious experiences can be deeply personal and, at the same time, express something that is universally meaningful and true. Specifically, learning involves a person or group acquiring a new skill, knowledge, or understanding. Yet, the person's or group's particular new insights may have a universal quality in that they can be shared with others and be a source of learning for them. Similarly, a personally transformative religious experience can simultaneously be an experience of the holy or ground of all being that, when shared with others, may prompt their religious/spiritual growth (see Elliott 1950, 198).

Elliott acknowledged that religious educators are separated by their differing understandings of education and diverse religious experiences and commitments (196). Yet, he stated that because of a shared commitment to exploring religion and education as universal aspects of personal and social life, religious educators are bound together in a "single movement," can experience "solidarity in a common cause," and form a "fellowship" which stretches across the nation and around the world (195–196). Within this fellowship, "what has characterized our relationships has been respect for the convictions of others. But this has been more than superficial tolerance. We have believed that our own experience would be enriched and the common cause furthered by the contribution of these diverse viewpoints" (196). Thus, Elliott recognized how sharing diverse perspectives could enable individual religious educators to develop their ideas about faith formation more fully and expand their understanding of religion and education as universal aspects of human living.

Elliott's analysis is significant because he showed how religious education could be envisioned as a unified field of academic inquiry from the founding of the REA to the mid-twentieth century. His understanding of religious education can continue to guide religious educators today in thinking about how we are united in a "single movement" even though we work in differing contexts and have diverse viewpoints. Thus, Elliott's perspective provides an alternative to understandings of the field that emphasize divisions within religious education, such as divisions between liberal religious educators and Christian educators, and Catholic educators, mainline Protestant religious and Christian educators, and evangelical Christian educators.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, the field of religious education continued to expand. It became even more diverse as religious educators in the United States and Europe forged connections with practices and traditions of educating in faith worldwide. Yet, even as religious education continued to expand, there continued to be an underlying unity in the field. To provide one of many possible examples, in Indonesia in 1955, Elmer G. Homrighausen introduced the term *Pendidikan Agama Kristen* (as the translation of what he referred to in English as "Christian Education," although the literal translation is "Christian Religious Education"). The term came to be associated almost exclusively with education about the Christian religion in schools and universities. In 1996, the term *Pendidikan Kristiani* (Christian Education) was introduced to refer to "all forms of educational and or coaching services that the

church must carry out to equip and develop its members, of all ages, to have proper knowledge, understanding and appreciation in daily life as Christians amid society" (Hardjowasito, Aritonang, and Sinaga 2002, xi). Thus, *Pendidikan Kristiani* expresses the underlying and unifying dual foci in religious education on education in faith communities and education about the role of religion in society, in this case, the role of Indonesian Christians in a multireligious/faith society.

Mid-twentieth-century articles in *Religious Education* on research in religious education by Wesner Fallaw (1950) and Herman Wornom (1961) emphasized the continuing importance on correlating foci on religion and education. They also confirmed the value of correlating concerns for practices and pedagogies of religious education and research in religious education. Thus, they affirmed that there continued to be an underlying unity in the field of religious education. Wornom, General Secretary of the REA from 1952 to 1970, also affirmed two central convictions of the founding vision of the REA that contributed to maintaining a unifying center in the field. First, he discussed the need for religious education research focused on developing practices of education in faith for both faith communities and the broader society. When he turned his attention to the need for education about the role of religion in public life, Wornom called religious educators to create a Spiritual Health Index for use in developing programs to improve "the spiritual health of the population" in the United States (1961, 305). Second, Wornom was attentive in his analysis to the interreligious nature of the field of religious education. Referring to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious bodies, he advocated for denominational organizations to develop age-appropriate religious education curriculums based on the latest research on human development. (For a foundational discussion of interreligious education, see Thompson 1988.)

A decade after Wornom, Elmer Towns addressed the issue of research in religious education in "Method in Philosophic Inquiry in Christian Education" (Towns 1972). Towns' article provides an example of how many religious educators from the second half of the twentieth century onward have sought to develop a clear focus for their work by centering it in a particular religious context while at the same time affirming the continuing expansion of research methods in religious education. On the one hand, Towns, a conservative-evangelical Christian, focused on Christian education rather than religious education to show his commitment to serving as an educator in Christian communities. On the other hand, Towns outlined how the scope of research in religious education had expanded to include philosophic research, that is, research based on conceptual analysis, guiding symbols and images, and speculation about humankind's "desirable societies, experiences, and ends" (262). Other significant contributions that expanded the scope of research in religious education from the last half of the twentieth century and into our current era include Crain and Seymour's (Crain and Seymour 1996) discussion of ethnographic research, Seymour's (Seymour 1987) and Sawicki's (Sawicki 1987) analyses of historical research, Conde-Frazier's (Conde-Frazier 2006) review of participant action research, and Elizabeth McIsaac Bruce's (McIsaac Bruce 2008) study of narrative inquiry.

It is significant to note that while research in the field continued to expand in the last half of the twentieth century, there continued to be underlying and unifying foci in religious education on the intersection of research and practice in education and religion/theology. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, religious educators have drawn insight from past and current research methods in education

to explore ways of fostering human development and flourishing. They have combined this educational focus with a concern for educating in faith communities and educating about the ways faith convictions can inform social outlooks and practices. Both those who identify as religious educators and those who identify as Christian educators have held or continue to hold these underlying convictions, at least to some extent. However, these underlying convictions are often overlooked because of an emphasis on the divisions among various religious educators. Additionally, religious educators have repeatedly failed to show, as Ayres' *Inhabitanace* illustrates, how concerns for education and religion are brought together in a coherent way and how they stand within the tradition of religious education inquiry, a religious education movement that can be traced back to the founding of the REA in 1903.

Two *Religious Education* forums on research in religious education in 2006 are the most comprehensive recent discussions of research in the field. The most striking feature of the forum articles is that they affirm core themes in the field of religious education from the time of the REA to the present. First, some of the researchers who contributed to the 2006 research forums sought to expand research in religious education. Specifically, they offered proposals to expand the field through studies of intercultural and interfaith education via dialogue in Europe (Halsall and Roebben 2006) and Christian religious education in Japan (Okuda 2006), and by adapting to the postmodern and global context of contemporary life (Cohen 2006). Other contributors to the 2006 forums proposed various avenues of new religious education inquiry: using cultural studies to explore how hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality affect people's lives (Parker 2006), employing womanist pedagogy to draw attention to the continuing need for religious educators to address racial oppression and gender discrimination (Westfield 2006), utilizing arts-based learning to foster an understanding of Jewish religious texts (Backenroth Epstein and Miller 2006), and reflecting on college undergraduate education in North America as a form of young adult religious education (Bowman 2006).

Second, while affirming the diversity in the field of religious education, several articles in the 2006 *Religious Education* forums explored ways of strengthening the underlying unity in the field. Echoing the reflections of Harper, Elliott, and others, Litchfield discussed how the REA has and can continue to be a movement that unites academics and practitioners in exploring the intersection, that is, crossroads, of religion and education "for the sake of life" in religious communities and in "public and global arenas" (Litchfield 2006, 163). Wright (2006) argued for the further development of the field by focusing on the interplay between philosophy and theology in the theory and practice of religious education in faith communities and public life (2006). Lawson (2006) called for further development of religious education as a distinct field of study through theological, historical, philosophical/conceptual, and empirical research in religious education. Kim (2006) affirmed the importance of educating for religious identity. English suggested that religious educators can renew the founding commitment in the field to seek practical, usable knowledge by utilizing participatory action research and encouraging collaborative research. Additionally, the continuing quest to articulate a comprehensive framework for understanding research in religious education as a field of study was addressed in forum articles by Friedrich Schweitzer (2006) from Germany and Margaret Ann Crain (2006) from the United States.

In contemporary times, the religious education movement set in motion by the founding of the REA in 1903 and carried forward to a significant degree by the research published in *Religious Education* has continued to push outward and expand worldwide. Additionally, religious educators have spawned or helped spawn other efforts to explore the intersection of religion and education within and beyond faith communities, schools, and other religious organizations, and the religious education movement has become intertwined with other initiatives focused on learning and development from religious and faith perspectives. Hence, it is significant to note that research on religious education is published in English today in *The British Journal of Religious Education* (which was preceded by *Learning for Living* [1961–1978] and *Religion in Education* [1934–1961]), *Christian Education*, *The Journal of Religious Education*, *The Journal of Christian Education in Korea*, The American Academy of Religion's *Religious Studies News* (RSN) special issues titled *Spotlight on Teaching* (RSN also published special issues titled *Spotlight of Theological Education* from 2013 to 2019), the annual issue of *Practical Theology* (PT) on Adult Theological Education (which PT has provided since 2018 when it subsumed the *Journal of Adult Theological Education* [JAFT], and JATF was preceded by the *British Journal of Theological Education* [1987–2994]), and other periodicals. The book series *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe*, which is a product of REDCo: *The Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or A Factor of Conflict* research project, an EU-funded study of religious education in European schools, also provides significant research in religious education.

A complete analysis of present-day research on religion and education is beyond the scope of this article. However, in the periodicals and book series mentioned in the last paragraph, there is a unifying concern for the intersection of religion and education in theory and practice in religious institutions, organizations, and the broader society. At the same time, in these outlets for scholarly research, we also see the rich international, multireligious, and interdisciplinary diversity of the work of contemporary religious educators, which Ghiloni described as the headaching diversity of religious education. Hence, we can raise the question, which will be considered in the next section: Even if we acknowledge that there is a measure of historical continuity in the field of religious education, can we discuss in a meaningful way today what unites us as religious educators?

Solidarity in religious education

In responding to this question, we return to the editorial we mentioned by Ghiloni at the beginning of this article. The editorial's title is "Religious Education Scholars Cannot Assume They Are Talking About the Same Things." He pointed out that the Bible provides a common point of reference for biblical scholars and claimed that, in contrast, there is no single referent in religious education. We contend that Ghiloni is only partly correct. He provides an accurate description of the surface structure of the field of religious education. In the present era, religious educators investigate practices of educating in faith in various contexts worldwide. Diverse theological perspectives and educational approaches also undergird our work, and we utilize a wide range of methods of investigation in researching religious educational practices.

The field of religious education is marked by what Norma Thompson has identified as "cultural pluralism," a broad term that indicates the existence of "ethnic diversity, social, economic, and political pluralism, as well as religious diversity" (1998, 12).

While religious educators are not always talking about the same things (plural), we are, nevertheless, talking about the same thing (singular). The field of religious education has a *unifying, deep structure* because religious educators, in our diverse endeavors, are talking about religion and education as essential aspects of human living. As Robert O'Gorman suggested in the quote with which we began this article, religious educators meet at and share a common concern for the intersection of practice and research/theory and religion and education. In his comments on religious education, Ghiloni fails to consider the unifying deep structure of the field of religious education.

We can better understand the relationship between the surface and deep structures of religious education by exploring the architecture of religious and educational understanding. Religious and educational insight is always personal and particular. We understand grace, holiness, God or the Holy, and other core religious concepts by having personal experiences relating to God, the Holy, or the transcendent in particular faith communities or life contexts. Similarly, genuine educational experiences are also personal and particular. They involve specific persons, groups of persons, or communities learning and coming to deeper insight about something that affects their lives. At the same time, what we experience when we have an experience of grace, holiness, and the divine is universal; we experience a connection with ultimate or universal truth/Truth that we may be able to share with others. Similarly, a deeply personal and particular learning experience can provide us with insights we can teach to others and, thus, contribute to the universal fund of human understanding. Therefore, Ghiloni is mistaken when he says that religious education has no single referent. The single referent for religious education is the universal dimension of the architecture of religious and educational understanding, albeit we never experience universal understanding except as mediated by particular life experiences.

Because they refer to the universal dimension of religious and educational understanding, the various embodied forms of educating about religion and for religious living that religious educators explore are, in most instances, commensurable and thus comparable rather than incommensurable. That is, because they are manifestations of the universal human quest to relate to ultimate/Ultimate meaning and value and the human quest to learn and develop, we as religious educators can share, compare, and contrast the various religious educational practices found throughout the world. Moreover, as Elliott stated more than fifty years ago, "We have believed that our own experience would be enriched and the common cause furthered by the contribution of these diverse viewpoints" (196). When we share our different experiences as religious educators, we can learn together about the ways the divine chooses to dwell in the diversity and beautiful messiness of everyday human living. The diversity in the field of religious education is a strength because each particular exploration of religious and educational meaning can provide us with deeper insight into and a fuller sense of the universal dimensions of religious and educational understanding.

To provide a greater sense of continuity, unity, and identity in the field of religious education, we recommend that religious educators identify their primary academic home as the field of religious education rather than designating theological

education or practical theology as their home base. At the beginning of the religious education movement, the term *religious* was used to express an expansive, ecumenical, and interfaith openness to reflecting on and discussing diverse religious experiences, religious practices and beliefs, and processes of religious learning within and beyond faith communities. Religious educators explored the religious dimensions of life as expressions of ultimate life concerns. The field of religious education emerged as a field of scholarly inquiry that is open to exploring religious learning in all its various guises.

Today, *religious education* is still the best term to describe a field of study that focuses on exploring the universal and particular expressions of religious and educational understanding. The term *theological education* does not express the continuity in the field from the early twentieth century to the present. Nor does it convey as fully as the term *religious education* an openness to exploring the full breadth and depth of religious experiences in family rituals, spending time in nature, talking with friends about ultimate life issues, personal reading and reflection, listening to music and watching films that raise questions of ultimate meaning and value, and other everyday activities as well as participation in a faith community. Moreover, *theological* and *theological education* often mean Christian theological education and Christian theology. As such, they do not have the expansive interfaith meaning of the terms *religious* and *religious education*. Additionally, when religious education is conceptualized as practical theology, education in faith is often envisioned as an area of interest within theology rather than an expansive exploration of the universal and particular architecture of religious and educational understanding.

Religious educators may articulate a sense of dual identity because of the double structure of religious and educational understanding. They may identify themselves as religious educators and Catholic educators, Lutheran educators, evangelical educators, or Christian educators, or as religious educators and pastoral or practical theologians, feminist theologians or theorists, Latinx Christian theologians, or Indonesian religious educators, for instance. However, to strengthen the field's identity, we advocate for religious educators to adopt religious education as their primary academic affiliation.

We also recommend that religious educators make a more intentional effort to read, enter into dialogue with, and cite each other's work. We suggest that the failure of so many religious educators to situate their work within the trajectory of the field's historical development and develop their ideas in dialogue with other religious educators has contributed significantly to the lack of a coherent sense of identity in the field. In contrast to this, Prevost (1988), Eschenauer (2012), and Davis (2021) provide examples of religious education scholarship grounded in the religious education tradition. Prevost draws insight from biblical, theological, educational, and religious educational scholarship in exploring the universal aspects of the prophetic dimensions of Christian faith. He also discusses how we can nurture an appreciation for this universal aspect of Christian faith in contemporary education in Christian faith. Drawing insight from Gabriel Moran's work, Eschenauer investigates how the deeply particular rituals of the Roman Catholic Church's Paschal Triduum express universal religious understandings of memory, imagination, and hope. Davis teases out the relationship between religious education and queerness by crafting an understanding of the queer identity of religious education in dialogue with the understanding of

religious education offered by Harrison Elliott and other religious educators. We suggest that religious education needs more studies like those of Prevost, Eschenauer, and Davis that pursue cutting-edge ideas about educating in faith informed by insights from the religious education tradition.

Most significantly, the practice of dialoguing across differences in religious education is no longer as central a part of the field as it was in the past. This decline in engagement among religious educators is due to a greater focus in some circles on denominational religious education and faith formation in specific educational contexts. Additionally, a polarizing climate in societies worldwide today often divides people with differing outlooks against one another and leads to fewer opportunities for genuine dialogue. We suggest that religious educators intentionally renew the practice of dialogue across differences. In considering such issues as the use of new information technologies in religious education, the increasing disaffiliation of many people from faith communities, and changing understandings of sexuality and gender, we, as religious educators, could benefit from a respectful sharing of diverse perspectives. Dialogue across differences could also equip religious educators with a broad understanding of life's religious and educational dimensions, enabling them to challenge sectarian and exclusivist religious claims in their religious denominations or communities. Overall, the question we must consider is: Are we, as religious educators, willing to stand in solidarity with one another at the crossroads of practice and research/theory, and religion and education, and share our diverse views about how to educate in and for the development of a lived sense of religion within faith communities and the broader society, and in doing so be a unifying yet counter-cultural presence in our polarized contemporary societies?

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