

Teaching From Commitment: A Developmental Perspective

Siebren Miedema

Free University of Amsterdam

Although I take a sympathetic stance towards Professor Thiessen's position, several questions arise with respect to his paper. First, I have a fundamental question about the underlying epistemological and ontological presuppositions of Professor Thiessen's world view. Unfortunately, in the paper, the issue of metaphysics is not systematically dealt with in relation to the author's view on liberal education and commitment. I also wonder what sense he makes of the quite different truth conceptions of the oratorical and the liberal-free conception of liberal education.¹

In my response I will concentrate, however, on the kind of commitment Thiessen thinks compatible with his reconstructed conception of liberal education. While Thiessen quite clearly pays attention to the different conceptions of liberal education in his paper, a systematic treatment of the core concept of commitment is missing. To get a better grip on his argumentation and conceptualization in the paper, I also turned to his 1993 book, *Teaching for Commitment*, to which the author refers for a more detailed description of his view. From his book I learned that commitment is a better word for faith.² In the paper, however, Thiessen states that "commitment is clearly one essential element of faith," and that "Christian nurture (that is, a confessional approach to Christian education³) can be described as beginning from a position of commitment and aiming to foster commitment to Christian faith."

It is possible to distinguish three conceptions of religious education on the basis of the kind of relation between faith and education: first, teaching *about* commitment; second, teaching *from* commitment; and third, teaching *for* commitment. I will elaborate on these conceptions, and will then criticize Thiessen's claim that, neither the second or third conception is indoctrinatory.

An example of the first conception are schools dealing with a plurality of commitments or faith positions. It is well-known under such headings as teaching-about-religions or the phenomenological-religious-study-approach.

It is my contention that, in respect to the second conception of religious education, (teaching from commitment), Thiessen very convincingly argues against any liberal educational claim for neutrality in the very process of education. "Ideological commitment is...inescapable. There is 'no innocent tradition.' including that of modernity....The notion of ideological neutrality is a gigantic piece of bad faith." In order to grow in the direction of autonomy, a child/pupil needs to be initiated by the parent or the teacher into a coherent and stable primary culture including a particular world view.⁴ So, from a pedagogical perspective, nothing is wrong with, or indoctrinatory about, the initiation or socialization of the child/the pupil in her *early stages of development* into a particular world view, or into any particular cultural and religious practices, ceremonies, habits, and contents. On the contrary, the commitment of the teacher in the early stage of development is a necessary prerequisite for the development of the autonomy of the child.⁵ Such a practice of the teacher can only be called "indoctrinatory" if it is not meant to develop the autonomy of the child, or (perhaps) if it is not likely to do so.

Thiessen's main objective, however, is not so much the initiation, socialization, or transmissionist stage, but the third conception of religious education: teaching *for* commitment. According to

Thiessen, teaching for commitment is not, in itself, indoctrinatory. I am not convinced. In my opinion, Thiessen does not successfully problematize the very differences between teaching from and teaching for commitment. The question that must be answered is whether the latter conception of religious education is, indeed, free from indoctrinatory aspects.

Taking a fully-fledged developmental understanding of upbringing and education, McLaughlin makes clear that "religious liberal parents may well hope that their child's eventual autonomy will be exercised in favour of faith (Thiessen's commitment for); but in the logic of their own religious -- as well as liberal -- position, this must remain a hope rather than a requirement."⁶ The Christian parent or teacher must educate children to enable them to make a decision, themselves, for or against their religious faith. A religious school can, according to McLaughlin, "provide through its particular religious tradition a context of relative stability of belief, practice and value, with the aim, not of entrapping pupils within it, but of providing them with a base from which their self-determination can proceed"⁷. So, schools should not be teaching for commitment or faith, but should enhance the development of relatively autonomous religious self-determination.

Taking the consequences of a developmental understanding of (liberal) education seriously, it is impossible to conclude, as Thiessen does in his book, that "Christian nurture necessarily includes an initiation/socialization component at all stages of a Christian's development."⁸ It is precisely this line of thought which, in my judgment, leads him to the conclusion that there is a dual goal for Christian parents and teachers -- that is, to nurture both Christian commitment and normal autonomy -- and that this goal "includes the hope (of Christian parents and teachers) that children or students will eventually make an "independent" choice for or against Christian commitment."⁹ Although he aims at encouraging students "gradually to reflect critically on the committed perspective into which they have been nurtured," this should, according to Thiessen, always be positioned "within the context of a school environment which is confessionally committed," and by teachers who "will openly teach for commitment based on (their) own faith stance."

Thiessen's duality, however, is a result of the way in which he is conceptualizing the transmissionist aspect -- that is, making the transmissionist component part of all the developmental stages of the child. If Thiessen admits that, seen from a developmental perspective, neither the parent's nor the teacher's educational goal should be the child's affirmation of faith, this duality will disappear, and with it, the aim of teaching for faith or commitment. From a developmental perspective regarding the development of autonomous religious self-determination, the transmissionist phase should be followed by a phase in which intersubjective dialogue and reciprocal communication between teacher and pupil, and among pupils will form the hard core.¹⁰ This is really something different from Thiessen's view, because in such an argumentative communicative process, the teacher is no longer the initiator of the child, but just like the child, an equal partner in co-constructive dialogue.

1. In Elmer John Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment. Liberal Education, Indoctrination & Christian Nurture* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press; Leominster, U.K.: Gracewing, 1993), Thiessen uses the term absolute truth and regards "a revelation from God as something given and therefore authoritative" (166, 167). From now on I will refer to this book as TC. And in a small paragraph on metaphysics in TC he criticizes naturalistic metaphysics and is pleading "for the possibility of a broader metaphysics which acknowledges a transcendent reality" (217). Furthermore, Thiessen states that in Christian schools, the traditional forms of knowledge "can and should be interpreted as a revelation of God's truth" (267). It seems that Thiessen's metaphysical position comes close to the orator's truth conception in Kimball's dichotomy (Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers. A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986) 218, 219) or to Toulmin's first phase of pre-modernity (Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 2).

2. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment*, 27.

3. Ibid., 26.

4. See Terrence H. McLaughlin, "Parental Rights and the Religious Upbringing of Children," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 18, no 1 (1984): 78.

5. See Ben Spiecker, "Indoctrination: The Suppression of Critical Dispositions," in *Freedom and Indoctrination: International Perspectives*, ed. Ben Spiecker and Richard Straughan (London: Cassell, 1991).
6. McLaughlin, "Parental Rights and the Religious Upbringing of Children," 79.
7. See Terrence H. McLaughlin, "'Education for All' and Religious Schools," in *Education for a Pluralistic Society: Philosophical Perspectives on the Swann Report*, ed. G. Haydon (London: University of London institute of Education, 1987), 77.
8. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment*, 253.
9. Ibid., 255.
10. See Siebren Miedema, "The Beyond in the Midst. The Relevance of Dewey's Philosophy of Religion for Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13, (1994): 231, 238.

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