

Book Reviews

Elmer John Thiessen. *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture.* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

The thesis of this book is that initiation into the Christian tradition—most particularly in the context of religious instruction—should not automatically be labelled “indoctrination” in the negative sense in which that word has come to be generally understood. Indeed, the charge of indoctrination has been taken so seriously, says Thiessen, that many Christian educators have watered down the confessional dimension of their teaching to the extent that it fails in one of its primary functions—initiating people into the Christian tradition. What the book aims to do is to reformulate the ideal of liberal education and redefine the concept of indoctrination. The hope is that a thorough re-examination of the charge of indoctrination will assist in developing a constructive approach to religious education. The reworked ideal of liberal education and concept of indoctrination are applied to a state-maintained system of public education.

Thiessen's lengthy look at the notion of indoctrination focuses, in turn, on four different strands commonly thought to be essential to the concept: content, methods, intention, and consequences. He devotes a chapter to each of these interrelated facets of indoctrination, contextualizing his examination within the perspective of contemporary ideas about liberal education.

The ideal of liberal education, says Thiessen, is not just a single ideal, but a variety of differing conceptions, all of which are built on two central notions: a more ancient, classical oratorical conception, characterized by a “dogmatist epistemology,” “a belief that truth can be known and expressed,” and a more recent Enlightenment, “liberal-free” conception characterized by such values as freedom, autonomy, individualism, equality, a suspicion of authority and tradition, toleration, critical rationality, science, and belief in progress—values that are central to defining the modern world or modernity. It is out of the context of this second ideal of liberal education, which adopts the anti-religious bias of the Enlightenment, that religious education has come under increasing suspicion, and the concern about indoctrination more prevalent.

Although he sees some difficulties with this ascendant ideal of liberal education, Thiessen does not want to reject it, but “to revitalize the ideal of liberal education, building on the strengths of liberalism, drawing on the correctives of conservatism, and thereby developing a more adequate notion of liberal education” (p. 54)—one out of which the reply to the charge of religious indoctrination will be made.

Thus, each essential criterion of indoctrination is related to a key ingredient of the ideal of liberal education: content to the scientific ideal, methods to the idea of rationality, intention to the ideal of autonomy, and consequences to the ideal of critical openness.

With regard to content, Thiessen shows how the common assumption that religion and science can be distinguished in terms of possessing or not possessing “doctrines” is problematic; in fact, they are much more alike than not alike in this respect. In terms of methods, it is demonstrated that non-rational methods of teaching (for example, initiating individuals into the forms of