
Pro Rege

Volume 40 | Number 4

Article 4

June 2012

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Recommended Citation

Lief, Jason (2012) "Pedagogy of Promise: The Eschatological Task of Christian Education," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 40: No. 4, 22 - 28.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol40/iss4/4

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Pedagogy of Promise: The Eschatological Task of Christian Education



by Jason Lief

In his book *Getting it Wrong From the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget*, Kieran Egan provides a critique of the manner in which developmental theory has been appropriated by contemporary educational structures.¹ He focuses on the ideas of Piaget and Dewey that emphasize the biological development of human cognition through a dialectical engagement of “practical” issues. Because this development is believed to be primarily natural or biological, the focus of formal schooling in this context

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has become the engagement of “age appropriate” or “developmentally appropriate” material. Dewey, specifically, believed the task of educators was to facilitate natural development by exposing students to practical problems that cultivate the disequilibrium necessary for students to cooperatively seek solutions that leads to cognitive ability and communal identity.

On the surface, this emphasis on biological development seems to be rather obvious, as the importance of making the connection between stages of development and educational praxis is, for the most part, taken for granted. How can Egan possibly disagree? While Egan acknowledges that biology plays an important role in cognitive development, at issue is the fundamental relationship between biology and culture. For Piaget and Dewey, the cultural world plays an important—but secondary—role in the educational process, as it provides the tools needed for an individual to engage the world. They believe that while culture provides the raw materials necessary for the educational process, these raw materials remain secondary to the natural process of equilibrium/disequilibrium that occurs within individual students.

Against this perspective Egan, in conversation with early 20th-century Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, argues that culture is the primary means by which human cognition and identity develop through the appropriation of what he refers to as “cognitive tools.”² Egan writes,

If, instead, we take a “cognitive tools” approach to development, we cease to look for some underlying spontaneous process within physical and cultural environments whose role it is to support some unfolding ontogenesis. Rather, we will see development in the micro scale as “it reveals itself in the restructuring of the child’s thinking and behavior under the influence of a new psychological tool”; in the macro scale, development “manifests itself as the lifelong process of the formation of a system of psychological functions corresponding to the entire system of symbolic means available in a given culture” (Kozulin 1998, 16). From a Vygotskian perspective, our intellectual abilities are not “natural” but are socio-cultural constructs. They are not forms of intellectual life that we are programmed in some sense to bring to realization; there is no naturally preferred form of human intellectual maturity. We are not designed, for example, to move in the direction of “formal operations” or abstract thinking or whatever. These forms of intellectual life are products of our learning, “inminding,” particular cultural tools invented in our cultural history.”³

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This paper will argue that Egan’s pedagogical understanding of education—as the appropriation of cognitive tools that correspond to various cultural ways of understanding—provides an important dialogue partner for the Christian community as we work to cultivate a Christian pedagogy. Egan’s perspective opens the issue of human cognition and human identity to sources outside the biological or natural realms, emphasizing the

significance of social relationships in the cultivation of knowledge and identity. In this way, Egan’s work provides an important conversation partner for Christian educators as we seek to form the identity of young people in the context of the resurrection of Jesus Christ—through communal ways of understanding. To make this argument, I will bring Egan’s perspective into conversation with Wolfhart Pannenberg’s theological articulation of “human becoming,” as well as Jurgen Moltmann’s “hermeneutic of promise,” for the purpose of describing how Egan’s pedagogical paradigm provides insight into the ways Christian education might provide the “communal tools” necessary for young people to be opened to their human destiny revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Descartes, Dewey, and Instrumental Reason

For Egan, cognitive development is not primarily an inside out process, or a biological unfolding; instead, it is primarily an “outside in” movement in which human cognition and identity are mediated through the “intellectual tools” and ways of understanding provided by the social world.⁴ This perspective comes from his appropriation of the psychological theories of Vygostky—who, as Egan writes in *The Educated Mind*, “understood intellectual development in terms of intellectual tools, like language, that we accumulate as we grow up in a society and that mediate the kind of understanding we can form or construct.”⁵ It is through the internalization of these socially constructed intellectual tools that cognitive development occurs—a process that, for Egan, is essentially linguistic and aesthetic. Because language is a primary means by which we construct meaning, it is through the internalization of the different forms of language—what he refers to as different “ways of understanding”—that cognitive development occurs. Egan writes, “The process of intellectual development, then, is to be recognized in the individual’s degree of mastery of tools and of sign systems such as language. The development of intellectual tools leads to qualitatively different ways of making sense: ‘The system of signs restructures the whole psychological process’. So the set of sign systems one internalizes from interactions with particular cultural groups, particular communities, will sig-

nificantly inform the kind of understanding of the world that one can construct.”⁶

Egan takes direct aim at the influence of Dewey’s educational theory upon contemporary compulsory education—particularly with regard to the rise and domination of the economic paradigm. A central tenant of Dewey’s theory is the belief that the formation of cognition and self-consciousness occurs through the recapitulation of the scientific and technological evolution of civilization, specifically emphasizing problem solving and the meeting of basic needs.⁷ This instrumental understanding of reason has increasingly pushed education into an economic paradigm, which can be seen in Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. Dewey writes,

Economic history is more human, more democratic and hence more liberalizing than political history. It deals not with the rise and fall of principalities and powers, but with the growth of the effective liberties, through command of nature, of the common man for whom powers and principalities exist.... Surely no better way could be devised of instilling a genuine sense of the past which mind has to play in life than a study of history which makes plain how the entire advance of humanity from savagery to civilization has been dependent upon intellectual discoveries and inventions, and the extent to which the things which ordinarily figure most largely in historical writings have been side issues, or even obstructions for intelligence to overcome.⁸

While the pedagogical practices advocated by Dewey have, for the most part, failed to take root within contemporary education, his pedagogical philosophy—specifically his view of instrumental reason—remains influential. Clearly, formal schooling has become the primary means by which contemporary North American society addresses social, political, and economic problems.⁹ While this situation is not new, what has changed is the extent to which schooling has become politically, economically, and socially institutionalized, as human freedom is increasingly understood to be the potential for self-determination via a utilitarian construction of the world through instrumental reason, which is reinforced by a cultural pedagogy

grounded in an economic interpretation of human identity.¹⁰

However, for Egan, it is through “myth and metaphor,” not “utilitarian problem solving,” that human cognition and identity develops.¹¹ In utilizing Vygotsky’s notion of the “zone of proximal development,” Egan argues that it is the social community—or our cultural particularity—that plays a primary role in the development of human identity and consciousness through the cultivation of language and myth.¹² For Egan, the educational process consists of the recapitulation of the “the five distinct languaged engagements with the world that have created collective human culture”—what he calls the somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophical, and ironic.¹³ Egan argues that it is through the internalization of the “cognitive tools” that correspond to these “ways of understanding” that human cognition, and therefore human identity, develops—a process that is possible only within the context of a social and cultural community.

The pedagogical praxis that develops from this perspective answers the question of identity formation with a relational understanding of the human person. In so doing, this praxis provides an important dialogue partner for the Christian community. More specifically, Egan’s emphasis upon the communal construction of identity through the imparting of linguistic cognitive tools provides the context for an important conversation. This conversation concerning the formation of a Christian pedagogy will allow Christian education to challenge the prevailing economic narrative while it cultivates an interpretation of human identity grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Resurrection of Christ: The Promise of Human Identity

Egan’s emphasis upon the social and cultural development of human consciousness correlates with the eschatological interpretation of “human becoming” found in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jurgen Moltmann. Pannenberg argues that human identity is formed as the egocentric self becomes open to the world through a relational encounter with the universal Other.¹⁴ Theologically speaking, this process is fully real-

ized in an encounter with Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection reveals the destiny of humanity. This Christological paradigm provides an interpretation of identity formation in which the source of identity is found outside the human self—in this case the event of Christ’s death and resurrection, which points to the future destiny of humanity and creation. Thus, the process of human becoming cannot be reduced to the self-actualization of free individuals through instrumental reason, nor can human freedom be reduced to a form of rational self-construction. Instead, the formation of human identity is understood as the relational opening of the self to God and to the world as revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here we find the eschatological impulse of Pannenberg’s theological anthropology, as it is only in the anticipation of this future made known in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that “human beings presently exist as themselves.”²¹⁵

In Moltmann’s theology, the resurrection of Jesus Christ not only reveals the future destiny of humanity but also represents the Spirit-induced in-breaking of agency and freedom that opens human history to new, transformative possibilities. Moltmann refers to faith in the resurrection as “a living force which raises people up and frees them from the deadly illusions of power and possession, because their eyes are now turned towards the future life.”²¹⁶ In Christ’s resurrection the future, eschatological life of the new creation breaks in upon the present in a “process of resurrection” that represents the “transition from death to life” and the promise of human becoming that is infused with “expectant creativity.”²¹⁷ This concept means that human identity is not grounded in a static past, nor is it determined by biology or the “practical” economic realities of the present. Instead, human identity “becomes a life which is committed to working for the kingdom of God through its commitment to justice and peace in this world... [t]rusting in God’s renewing power, ... joining in the anticipation of God’s Kingdom, [and] showing now something of the newness which Christ will complete on his day.”²¹⁸

Ultimately, what connects Pannenberg and Moltmann’s theology with Egan’s pedagogical insight is an aesthetic (trust, love, language, myth,

etc) understanding of human identity. Egan argues that it is the human capacity for myth that provides the foundation for the construction of meaning and identity. In other words, the various forms of narrative and metaphor comprise this mythic framework to form the building blocks for the development of other ways of understanding—the

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romantic, philosophical, ironic, and somatic. Egan writes, “This poetic world—emotional, imaginative, metaphoric—is the foundation of our cultural life, as a species and individually. [More abstract modes of thinking] do not properly displace the poetic world, but rather grow out of and develop it; they are among its implications.”²¹⁹

Using Egan’s terminology, we can say that the eschatological theology of Pannenberg and Moltmann constitutes a mythic (poetic) interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the foundational narrative in which human identity is given meaning.²²⁰ This eschatological interpretation of human identity forces us to consider the aesthetic nature of human becoming and the importance of cultivating a theological imagination that poetically grounds human identity within the promise of new creation given to us in Christ’s resurrection. In this context, the purpose of Christian education becomes the formation of a “Christian” imagination through the development of a pedagogy grounded in the promise of Christ’s resurrection.

Conclusion: Pedagogy of Promise and the Christian Community

Kieran Egan’s work provides an important paradigm for naming and challenging the economic pedagogy that undergirds both Christian and secular educational structures. While such structures speak of freedom and possibility, they are hemmed in by the status quo—the world as it

has been given to us by capitalist ideology. Thus, the institutionalized lives of young people remain subject to the social pedagogy of gainful employment and economic self-fulfillment, in which freedom becomes the power to overcome social circumstances by controlling and manipulating the world. A critical engagement of contemporary youth culture reveals the effects of this paradigm, as young people desperately construct and reconstruct identity in an attempt to deal with anxiety and attain security.

Even religious belief is appropriated by this paradigm—especially within Christian schools. It offers the divine sanction and blessing of the status quo, which offers stability and security, as seen in Christian Smith's well-known articulation of the general religious worldview of Christian young people in North America as a pragmatic form of "moralistic, therapeutic deism."²¹ For the Christian community to address this situation, it must develop a counter pedagogy rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ—a "pedagogy of promise," comprised of a language and praxis grounded in faithfulness, hope, trust, and love.

In his book *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, Jurgen Moltmann talks about a "hermeneutic of hope" grounded in the language of promise, in which the past and present are caught up in the anticipation of the future.²² Central to this hermeneutic is the promissory nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as God's "speech act"—the promise of God concerning the future destiny of humanity and all of creation. The task of the Christian community is to testify to a way of being human in the world that is grounded in the promise—the speech act—of Christ's resurrection. This testimony involves the formation of an eschatological pedagogy that recognizes the telos of humanity as the new creation of which Christ's resurrection is a pledge and promise. In the event of Christ's resurrection, the process of human becoming is opened to a source of life and meaning outside of the self—being grounded in the trust and love of a relational existence with God, others, and the created world.

Ultimately, this process means that Christian education in all its forms must cultivate a pedagogical praxis that opens young people to the possibil-

ity of resurrection and new creation. A "pedagogy of promise" does not teach in order to explain how things "are"—hoping to plug young people into the world as it is given to us. Rather, the focus of such pedagogy is the promise and anticipation of how things will be. This pedagogy opposes the totalizing economic paradigm that undergirds current educational praxis structures by inviting young people to look for the signs of new creation and the kingdom of God in the world"—asking not "what is" but "what should and will be." In this context, Christian education cannot be satisfied with helping students take their place in the so-called "real world"—thus, job training must never be the implicit or explicit basis for a Christian educational praxis.

Furthermore, Christian education should not appeal to "creation" as the basis of educational theory and praxis, disconnected from the eschatological telos of creation—the coming Kingdom of God that is promised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Education done in the context of "creation" runs the risk of becoming a new form of "natural law" that provides a divine sanction for the symbolic and institutional order of the status quo. Only an eschatological doctrine of creation—one that recognizes that all of creation remains open to "new-ness" and possibility through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—can become the basis for a truly Christian educational praxis.

A pedagogy grounded in this understanding of human identity is prophetically both formative and subversive—seeking to cultivate a sense of liberation and agency by which young people become open to the possibility of new creation. This means cultivating a pedagogical praxis that testifies to the unjust and inhuman social structures and patterns through what Moltmann refers to as "subversive talk about God." Moltmann writes, "Subversive talk about God gives voice to counter-images to the self portrayals of the powers of the present, counter histories to the stories of the victories and successes of tyrants, whole counter-worlds to the powers and conditions of 'this world.'"²³ Such subversive talk about God must permeate the educational method and content of Christian education at all levels.

Kieran Egan's work offers a significant meth-

odological paradigm for the articulation of this promissory pedagogical task within Christian education. Egan takes seriously the social and cultural mediation of meaning and identity—a challenge to Christian education to think seriously about the institutional structures and practices we develop and about the ways they implicitly “inmind” young people with a particular understanding of the world. His appropriation of the cultural tools and ways of understanding offers to Christian schools a practical way to reflect upon how the identity of young people might be formed somatically, mythically, romantically, philosophically, and ironically. Ultimately, Egan’s work challenges Christian education to reflect upon how the learning and formation of young people is poetically grounded within the foundational narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection so that they might open themselves to the freedom and promise of the coming Kingdom of God. Finally, Egan’s work challenges Christian education to establish a creative educational space in which the subversive talk about God and the hope of resurrection resists the domination and injustice of the status quo, opening young people to the imaginatively creative anticipation of the life of new creation.

Endnotes

1. Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
2. Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
3. Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning : Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget*, 113-14.
4. See L. S. Vygotsky and Alex Kozulin, *Thought and Language*, Translation newly rev. and edited (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).
5. Egan, *The Educated Mind : How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 29-30.
7. Theodora Polito, “Educational Theory as Theory of Culture: A Vichian Perspective on the Educational Theories of John Dewey and Kieran Egan,” *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 37, no. 4 (2005).
8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Text-Book Series in Education (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916).
9. See A.H. Halsey Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and Amy Stuart Wells, “The Transformation of Education and Society: An Introduction,” In *Education, Culture, Economy, and Society*, ed. A.H. Halsey Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and Amy Stuart Wells. (New York: Oxford Press, 1997).
10. See Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? : Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Specifically his treatment of social structures and the institutionalization of cultural forces found in chapter 6 “The Personal Sources of Social Structures.”
11. Polito, “Educational Theory as Theory of Culture: A Vichian Perspective on the Educational Theories of John Dewey and Kieran Egan.”
12. Egan, *The Educated Mind : How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*, 29. Egan writes, “[I]n Vygotsky’s view, higher psychological processes—such as dialogic question and answer structure—begin in interactions with others, as “external” social functions that were themselves invented perhaps long ago in cultural history, and then become internalized and transformed into psychological functions” (29).
13. Polito, “Educational Theory as Theory of Culture: A Vichian Perspective on the Educational Theories of John Dewey and Kieran Egan,” 486. Also see Egan, *The Educated Mind : How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*.
14. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 68. Pannenberg writes, “Such knowledge is reached only when reflective attention turns thematically to the universal which is given simultaneously with perception of the object.”
15. *Ibid.*, 527.
16. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ : Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, 1st HarperCollins ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 241.
17. *Ibid.*, 340.
18. *Ibid.*, 341.

- 19 Egan, *The Educated Mind : How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*, 69.
- 20 Cornelius A. Buller, *The Unity of Nature and History in Pannenberg's Theology* (Lanham, Md.: Littlefield Adams Books, 1996), 101. Buller writes, "On the other hand, in 'Christentum und Mythos' Pannenberg attempts to counter dialectical theology's negative interpretation of myth. He accepts Malinowski's definition of myth as fundamentally related to a primeval event (Ureignis). Myth functions as 'grounding and foundational history.' Myth is conceived as a generative primeval event that is fundamentally connected with ritual performance in the present. What Pannenberg gains by accepting this definition of myth is a ground upon which to criticize what he regards as the less carefully defined use of myth in Bultmann's demythologization program."
- 21 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.
- 22 Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology : Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).
- 23 *Ibid.*, 175.