

July 2013

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Recommended Citation

Denig, S. J. (2003). A History of Christian Education: Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Perspectives, by J. L. Elias. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 7 (1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol7/iss1/11>

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A HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: PROTESTANT, CATHOLIC, AND ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES

J. L. ELIAS. KRIEGER PUBLISHING, 2002.

Reviewed by Stephen J. Denig

John Elias of Fordham University in New York City is most likely familiar with the Grey Line Tours of New York. You board a tour bus and for the next few hours you are carried around the city. The tour guide points out the sites, giving you a taste of what there is and encouraging you to revisit various points of interest. Occasionally the bus stops and you can get off for a more in-depth look at something. However, there just never seems enough time to investigate everything.

I felt like that as I read *A History of Christian Education* by John Elias. In the space of 260 pages of text, he reviews more than 2,500 years of education. Instead of being a traditional history of education, stressing names, places, and events, the book is more a history of educational philosophy. In a typical perennialist fashion, he wants to expose us to the great ideas that have guided educational development. As he makes clear, so many of these great ideas are rooted in the classics.

He tempts us with Plato and Aristotle, with Isocrates and Quintillian, with Marcus Aurelius and Origen. We gain a taste and move on. In the first chapter alone, classical Greek, Roman, Jewish, Apostolic, and early Church influences on Christian education are reviewed. For this reviewer, this was done much too briefly. The topics explored in chapter one are themselves worthy of a book. For brevity's sake, I am sympathetic to a brief treatment, but here I came away hungry for more.

During the Medieval Period, education was synonymous with religious education. In a chapter that may be difficult to read for someone not versed in Latin and theology, Elias makes clear the interrelationship of religion and education—the major concern of educators was theological education. Secular education, when it was a concern, was secondary. Intellectual life was faith seeking understanding. The bedrock was faith in God and this faith led to the pursuit of knowledge. Whether through the ancient classics of Platonic philosophy during the early medieval period, or the study of Aristotle during the late Medieval and Renaissance period, the pursuit of philosophy and classic literature sought to articulate an understanding of God (theology).

During the Scholastic period, Elias demonstrates that there was a shift in the recipients of education and, thus, the purpose of education. Education was expanded beyond the confines of theological education for the clergy and religious. Besides these groups, the upper classes of society were interested in obtaining an education. The focus of education became living a moral life. Petrarch was especially influential in promoting Latin classical literature as a way of teaching citizenship and moral life.

This focus continued into the Renaissance, when a split developed between Protestants and Catholics. Education was no longer restricted to the elite. Elias opines that Martin Luther among the Protestants and the Jesuits among the Catholics were the leaders in the effort to open the doors to education to all as a way of promoting a life of learning and piety. With this split, education, which had served as a uniting force in Europe, now became “one of the most powerful instruments for fostering division” (p. 94).

In chapter 4, Elias shows how this division grew. Catholic education, especially under the influence of the Jesuits and the teaching orders of religious, developed differently than Protestant education. He also demonstrates how Protestant education emerged differently in Germany, France, England, and other countries. In England, the history of education was further divided between Anglicans and the nonconformists. It would not be until the 1960s that, as a result of Vatican II and the ecumenical movement, these traditions would again converge.

It is within the context of English education that Elias begins the discussion of Christian education in the United States. He devotes chapter six to a discussion of Protestant education in this country and chapter seven to Catholic education. Those familiar with Christian education in the United States may find these chapters to be a good refresher. Chapter six contains a discussion of the role of Horace Mann and the rise of the public school system. Elias believes that the nondenominational school was, in its origins, a distinctly Christian school, which reflected the Unitarian faith of Mann. He also includes in the chapter on Protestant education a summary of the role of liberation theology in the civil rights movement and an all-too-brief analysis of the role of feminism. In the chapter on Catholic education, the author shows how in the United States the Catholic school system developed as a reaction to the nondenominational schools of Mann. He also includes a separate section on the profound effect Vatican II had on the purpose of Catholic parochial and catechetical education.

A final Christian tradition of education that Elias covers separately is that of the Orthodox faith. This tradition is the subject of the final chapter of the book and is a welcome addition. In Christian education, we can often be very parochial and not be conscious of other traditions. This reviewer has rarely read any book or article on this great religious tradition, and found the discussion of the role of icons in the religious education tradition of the Orthodox

Church to be especially rewarding. This chapter alone is reason enough for any serious scholar of religious education to purchase the book.

In conclusion, this book takes a glance at the two-thousand-year history of Christian education. Elias has taken this glance from a philosophical vantage point by showing how this tradition is rooted in classic Greek and Roman philosophy. He demonstrates how this tradition continued to develop through the Medieval and Renaissance periods, until it emerged in the West as separate Protestant and Catholic traditions, which are now slowly converging. He also demonstrates the separate development of the Orthodox tradition. If this book has one fault, it is that it attempts to cover too much rich tradition in too few pages.

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