



Adult Education and Learning in a Precarious Age: The Hamburg Declaration Revisited (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 138)

Nesbit, Tom; and Welton, Michael, eds.
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Book Review

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In 1997, the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) crafted the visionary *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and Agenda for the Future* (UNESCO, 1997) claiming that adult education could contribute to “a world in which violent conflict is replaced by dialogue, a culture of peace based on justice . . . and the creation of a learning society committed to social justice and general well-being” (2-3). What is the value of an idealistic treatise like the *Hamburg Declaration*? And what does it matter to theological education?

Religious education faculty want their teaching to impact student learners and to make a positive difference in their global communities. In an ever-changing world, it is essential that theological educators situate their teaching within the larger sociocultural milieu, recognizing how contextual realities inform and shape both the process and content of adult learning. The *Hamburg Declaration* demands that educators heed its call and answer its pedagogical implications.

Contributors to this current volume were invited to provide a critical analysis of the *Declaration's* core themes, particularly in light of political, social, economic, and cultural transformations occurring throughout the world today (4). They chronicle the challenges and opportunities that adult education has had in issues surrounding democracy, women, literacy, work, environment, technology, international policy, and economics – particularly in the years since the declaration was published. While today's pressing concerns may differ from those in 1997 – for example, the changing nature of work and unprecedented advances in technology –

nevertheless, a review of these themes may be instructive for how educators might examine related issues within the context of religious and theological education.

The *Hamburg Declaration* follows from the emphases of adult educators such as Brookfield, Freire, Hooks, and Illich, who affirm the political nature of education. Political and social realities do indeed shape the context of student learning. In cultivating appropriate pedagogical strategies to address the most urgent global issues, *Adult Education and Learning in a Precarious Age* suggests that we pay heed to the process of framing problems and how these inform solutions. Reiterating the emphasis in Hamburg, co-editor Welton affirms an “ethic of dialogue respectful of the different moral and spiritual options” that is “best able to promote the learning process” (17). Such dialogue is essential as teachers engage students in critical reflection of relevant global issues. Yet, the preliminary analysis by the authors of this volume invites further interaction from an explicitly theological perspective.

Although one may question the actual progress made on the concerns identified in the *Hamburg Declaration* and the role of adult education, this work still serves as timely inspiration for values-driven religious educators who are motivated by the pursuit of truth, justice, and ethics; who long to foster transformative education with impact beyond the classroom. As Nesbit, this volume’s co-editor, asserts, “What is possible is shaped, in part, by our visions” (98).

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