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Issues in Religion and Education. Whose Religion?

International Studies in Religion and Society 25.
Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015. xvi, 388 pages and index,
hardback € 140,00/\$181.00, ISBN: 978-9004289802.

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The book *Issues in Religion and Education. Whose Religion?* is the result of an international workshop which took place in Ottawa / Canada in November 2013. It covers the role of religion in the public education system and its dependency on several external and internal factors, as well as the fact that it is significantly culturally influenced.

Religious education cannot be assessed as an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is associated with the role of religion in the respective society as a whole. Especially English speaking countries like Canada, India, America and some European countries are taken into consideration. Different types of 'education about religion' models, established in the above-mentioned countries, provide the starting point for the precise investigation. In comparison to establishing this shared feature of the countries under scrutiny, it is far more difficult to answer the question raised by the title of the book: "Whose Religion?".

The editors of the book, Lori G. Beaman and Leo Van Arragon point out that it is not possible to settle this issue unequivocally and beyond dispute. There are different forms of religions and varying attitudes towards religion, complemented by the issue of determining those persons responsible for religious education in public schools. All of the mentioned aspects can be

answered in different ways — politically, socially and theoretically — which makes it quite difficult to find an appropriate response. The 17 chapters of the book perfectly illustrate the diverse approaches to the problem and the respectful dispute about possibilities, as well as limitations of religious education in public schools.

In the first main chapter (called “Contexts”), historical and cultural contexts of the role of religion in schools are discussed exemplarily.

It starts with Adam Dinham’s article (“Public Religion in an Age of Ambivalence: Recovering Religious Literacy after a Century of Secularism”, pp. 19-33), who outlines a problem that can be linked to secularisation: Because religion became a strictly private matter, the public of Great Britain forgot how to talk about religion and decided to distrust it. Especially English universities have to face these challenges, too. Being social institutions with cultural and religious diversity they have to have different models of dealing with religion. Moreover, religious education in school has to be more than just education about religion and values. It should enable students to handle religious diversity. Leo Van Arragon (“Religion and Education in Ontario Public Education: Contested Borders and Uneasy Truces”, pp. 34-58) outlines the development of education about religion in Ontario. Religious minorities who felt discriminated against by the predominant Christian religious instruction at school claimed this. That is why lessons have been limited to common values and the formation of critical thinking in the sense of secularisation. Therefore, the students are deprived of their individual religion and the fostering of critical thinking by means of Bible and other religious perspectives are ignored.

Daman Mayrl (“Minority Faiths and Religious Education Policy: The Case of Australian and American Jews 1945-1980”, pp. 59-82) shows the commonalities and differences in religious education in America and Australia during the post war years 1945-1980 and their influence

on present religious education policy. Whereas in America church and state have been strictly separated, Australia has been having religious education in schools, performed by clerical staff. With the help of Australia and America the role and the influence of minorities in discussions about religious education in a pluralistic society is reflected.

Asha Mukherjee (“Religion as a Separate Area of Study in India”, pp. 83-103) talks about the fact that religion in India can be characterized more as consisting of religious practices, rather than being a doctrinal system that has to be taught. Reasons like secularisation and the special national identity of Indian people seem to foster the negligence of religion in schools and universities according to Mukherjee.

The second main chapter (called “Conceptualising Religion”) provides an insight into the conceptualisation of religion. This is deeply affiliated with the assumption which the involved institutions and researchers have regarding school and educational policy. Sonja Sikka (“What is Indian ‘Religion’? How should it be taught?” pp. 107-125) takes up Asha Mukherjee’s idea and refers to the concept of religion in the ‘West’ and the fact that the western term ‘religion’ is not assignable to the Indian idea of religion. The deep connection of different but overlapping religions in daily practice make religion and culture merge in India. An individual religious education seems to be dispensable against this background. Therefore, academic studies should not aim at creating a religious identity, but they should enable students to handle religion in a philosophical way and to develop a sense for the specific importance of religion in India.

It does not suffice if politicians and theorists make up a multi-faith approach to religious education. Therefore, Geir Sekei (“What Does Conceptualisation of Religion Have to Do With Religion in Education?” pp. 126-155) calls for integrating the ideas and experiences which teachers and students make in every-day school life. Lori G. Beaman, Lauren L. Forbes

and Christine L. Cusack (“Law’s Entanglements: Resolving Questions of Religion and Education”, pp. 156-182) outline the processes of secularization and deconfessionalisation and their consequences for the education system in Canada. Since 1982 and the introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the relationship between religion and education has not been defined precisely. The complex situation is illustrated by ten significant cases which the Canadian Supreme Court had to rule. Moreover, parents and teachers are seen as important factors of influence, here. Solange Lefebvre (“From Religion to Spirituality in Education: Towards a Political Regulation of Spirituality?” pp. 183-207) describes the politically controlled process from a denominational orientated religion to a more general spirituality and culture in Quebec’s educational system.

The “Challenges” of the third main chapter are obvious. They arise out of the increasing pluralisation of our societies. This means that a huge number of different groups with various moral concepts want to and have to participate in the discussion about religion. This is closely linked to questions of power and influence. Whose voice will be heard? The ultimate aim should be harmonious coexistence of different groups in one society. The first social determinant that Heather Shipley (“The Space in Between: Religion, Sexual Identity, Media and Education in Ontario”, pp. 211-230) takes into account is the media. The comments thematically focus on the ambivalent presentation and meaning of religion and gender in the media. For this purpose a research project about the constructive process of young people in terms of their religious and sexual identity is described. Being an increasingly secular and pluralistic society, Canada has to learn how to deal with sexual permissiveness without discriminating against religious people.

Bruce Grelle (“Neutrality in Public School Religion Education: Theory and Politics”, pp. 231-256) shows the importance of impartiality in religious education at public schools using the example of the USA. Through this

impartial approach, students are enabled to develop a critical distance to their own religious identity and position. Catherine Byrne (“Religion, the Elephant in the Asia-Focused Australian School Room”, pp. 257-281) outlines that for long time, privileged religious groups like the Australian Protestants were unwilling to give up their position despite the fact that the country is becoming more and more pluralistic, both in ethics and in religious terms. Legislation is lagging behind the demographic change, here. Taking Ireland and its prevalent denominational schools as examples, Alision Mawhinney (“Religion in Schools: A Human Rights Contribution to the Debate”, pp. 282-303) points out that putting religious minorities at a disadvantage to the benefit of the existing majority should be avoided.

Finally, freedom of religion is a commitment according to the international agreed human rights. Despite all the differences between individual chapters of this book, the last main chapter (called “Textures”) takes into account similar issues: Who represents religion in public? Which role does religion play in an increasingly multicultural school system? What is happening to the religion of today’s youth? Pamela Dickey Young (“Who Speaks for Religion?” pp. 307-320) discusses the question of who is allowed to represent religion in public when it comes to the issue of homosexual relationships. It is not only the bishops’ and parents’ voices that need to be heard. Anna Halafoff and Kim Lam (“Lagging Behind Other Nations: The Religions in School Debate in Australia”, pp. 321-345) lament the fact that Australia is slower to develop an intercultural and interreligious education model in public schools than other countries. The diversity of religion has been recognised and there is a kind of ‘special religious education’ that provides denominationally neutral religious education. But other nations provide models that work much better, as international examples of best practice show. Mathew Guest (“Religion and the Cultures of Higher Education: Student Christianity in the UK”, pp. 346-366) presents a study

about religion of students in the UK. Students' faith has nothing to do with the 'traditional religion'. It is far more individual, fluid and synthesising. Stéphanie Gravel ("Impartiality of Teachers in Quebec's Non-Denominational Ethics and Religious Culture Program", pp. 367-387) analyses teachers' religious neutrality when giving lessons in non-denominational ethics and religious culture (ERC) in the province of Quebec. This subject has become a compulsory part of the curriculum since 2008 in both elementary and secondary schools. The aim is to foster common civic values and therefore to present religion as a cultural fact. There seems to be no need to help students answering their questions about their faith. The survey shows that being impartial is not possible when it comes to questions about religion, faith and values.

Conclusion: In a global and pluralistic world there seems to be no room for a distinct model of religious education in public schools. The articles of this edited volume outline the discussion about the influence of cultural, social and historical contexts on the design of religious education. Therefore, a broader view can help to ascertain one's own identity and the specific challenges in ones own country. It can also provide inspiration through developments in other countries and the mutual process of learning. The diverse contributions in this recommendable book broaden one's own horizon and provide important insights.

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