Book Review


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Religious education in schools was described in a 2013 report by the schools’ inspectorate for England and Wales (Ofsted: “Religious Education: Realising the Potential”) as having “a confused sense of purpose”—hardly surprising, given the demands placed upon the subject in plural liberal societies: to inculcate tolerance and respect for religions and beliefs, contribute to community cohesion, combat extremism, to help students develop their own beliefs and values and provide academic qualifications. The public, including parents, have their own expectations depending on their attitudes to religions and beliefs that differ from their own. This collection of articles by Robert Jackson, from the early 1990s to 2018, throws light on many of the debates and controversies surrounding religious education under the influences of secularization, pluralization and globalization.

The book contains previously published work, some co-authored, and introductions to each section by the author. After the introductory Part 1, the book is arranged in four further sections covering empirical research with children and young people from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds (Part 2); the interpretive approach to religious education which was informed by this research (Part 3); debates around religious education and plurality (Part 4) and, finally, work based on Jackson’s involvement with international and European debates and policy making.

Throughout the book the emphasis is on religions as complex social realities, characterized by diversity and change when manifested in specific people’s lives in specific cultures. Jackson argues that this complex social reality cannot be understood by attempting to describe the beliefs and practices of a particular religion; rather, religions are “understood in terms of the relationship of individuals to the groups they belong[ed] to, and the relationship of both to aspects of the wider religious tradition” (p. 7). To understand these relationships Jackson advocates interpretive or hermeneutical methods rather than phenomenological ones, not only in research but in religious education in state schools (p. 131).

Jackson describes the development of his interpretive approach as the theoretical framework for translating the material from ethnographic studies into teaching materials for RE. The interpretivist approach is an “information-based, impartial and dialogical” approach (p. 7). It seeks to be inclusive of all students whatever their religious or non-religious positions but requires critical engagement with different positions and self-analysis.
rather than a neutral and detached world religions approach (p. 98). It can be argued that the study of religions and beliefs can therefore contribute to knowledge and understanding of religion, engaging students from diverse backgrounds, and contribute to their own identity formation. Using case studies and followers of a faith as learning resources help to convey the diversity of religion with an emphasis on personal and social experience. For Jackson the school is an essential forum for students to participate in the discussion of religious, cultural and moral issues, and the skills of “listening, negotiating and formulating a position” in RE are essential to good citizenship (p. 206).

In Chapter 6, Jackson discusses the need to reassess simplified and stereotyped representations of religions and Smith’s argument that the terms “faith”, meaning personal faith, and “tradition”, meaning everything transmitted from one generation to another, should be used. Jackson takes a middle path in which “Hinduism” or “Christianity” refer to “constructions of each religious tradition made by different insiders and outsiders” (p. 115).

The criticisms of multifaith RE include the charge of relativism. Jackson acknowledges that the interpretive approach leaves questions of truth and value open but that these are questions to be pursued as part of religious education (p. 124). Another criticism is that controversial issues and conflicts are filtered out and critical engagement avoided in the interests of the social aims of developing tolerance and respect for religion to contribute to a harmonious society. Jackson wants to emphasize the intrinsic value of religious and non-religious belief systems and their role in personal development and cautions against an overemphasis on social aspects. As Jackson argues, religious educators do not see “the desire for racial pluralism and tolerance” (p. 124) as the sole aim of religious education; however it is also clear that this aim is of importance to politicians and some parents and recognized by children as an expectation held by their teachers. The related accusation of the “ politicization” of RE is addressed by Jackson in the final chapter.

On the issue of critical debate, Jackson found that sometimes children are more open to critical exploration than adults in their community. Given that critical engagement is essential to the interpretivist approach it would be interesting to have had some more discussion of the challenges in teaching the necessary skills, perhaps commenting further on Andrew Wright’s work on critical RE and criteria for making critical judgements. As several writers on RE (with reference to British schools) have commented, children are encouraged to articulate their own views in the classroom, but there is not enough stress on enabling them to dialogue with religion and to be challenged by its values and commitments.

The final section draws on Jackson’s participation in international research and policy making including the Council of Europe’s projects and activities on religious diversity and education and the EU-funded REDCo project. REDCo explored whether RE in Europe contributes positively to religious dialogue or is rather a potential source of conflict. The last chapter of the book addresses concerns over the securitization and politicization of RE. The scope of this chapter is limited to addressing the criticism, by Liam Gearon, of the REDCo project as having the sole aim of promoting tolerance. Gearon argues that democratic states politicize RE as part of their drive to promote tolerance in response to increased diversity and refers to “a collusive relationship” with the REDCo project’s political funders—a charge that Jackson refutes. This might be a topic to which Jackson could return in a future publication. In England and Wales many teachers are concerned about the links between RE, citizenship and British values, all of which feature on the school curriculum.

This collection will be of interest to those involved in religious education, whether or not they are already familiar with aspects of Jackson’s work. The broader European perspective is refreshing for those engaged in RE in Britain. There is also much of interest to those who undertake research into the views of young people.