



Religion, Education and Society

Arweck, Elisabeth; and Jackson, Robert, eds.
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014

Book Review

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Religion, Education and Society details research on the role of religious education (RE) in the secondary school system in the United Kingdom. The book is a selection of papers first presented at the conference “Religion in Education: Findings from the Religion and Society Programme” held at the University of Warwick (July 2011). The collection of contributions examines young people as they relate to religion in various settings. The study is diverse in terms of the religions included (Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism). Chapters reveal how young people reflect on religion in the classroom, with peers, in their families, in religious communities, and in wider society.

Chapters report on findings related to three research areas. The first part consists of four chapters reporting on “Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity.” Findings reveal that young people’s attitudes toward religion in general and to religious diversity are more strongly influenced by the practice and perceptions of religion in the broader community than by RE in the classroom (13-26). Research exposed a potentially negative result of school-based RE in contexts characterized by low levels of religious literacy; that information learned can be used to ridicule religious peers rather than to further mutual understanding (27-30). Contributors paint a picture of factors that influence religious faith among young people including religious affiliation, participation in public worship, personal faith practice and belief, and perceptions of God (31-60).

The second part includes two chapters addressing the question, “Does Religious Education Work?” In the introduction to the volume, the editors identify two primary reasons for RE in public schools: (1) that religion is an integral part of human experience and worthy of examination, and (2) that the study of religion is instrumental in promoting social cohesion and

enhancing the personal development of young people (5-11). Unfortunately, RE often suffers from a lack of clarity in purpose – thus hindering its intended outcomes. Findings provide insight on how postmodern thought, a constructivist philosophy of education, and contemporary societal realities have made it difficult to maintain a unified purpose for RE (61-80).

The third part comprises seven chapters exploring the role and impact of RE in diverse contexts (81-169). Research presented describes the impact of various aspects of RE programs including curricula, teaching methodology, and the role of instructors in shaping the religious identities of young people. Emerging from these pages are practical guidelines for administrators, curriculum developers, and instructors. Chapters provide religious communities with workable models for partnering with RE programs in passing faith traditions on to future generations.

A conspicuous strength of this book is critical analysis looking at factors influencing the effectiveness of RE in public schools. As such, the volume is particularly valuable for faculty teaching in RE programs. Consequently, the work is a significant contribution to both theory and practice of RE.

Religion, Education and Society is to be commended for clarifying the purpose and presenting best practices in RE in public educational settings. Working through this volume will reward those engaged in teaching religious studies.

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