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## Religion in the Primary School: Ethos, Diversity, Citizenship (Book Review)

Peter J. Hemming

New York: Routledge, 2015

150 pages; \$160.00 USD (hardcover), \$54.95 USD (ebook)

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Reviewed by Ronald J. Nuzzi, University of Notre Dame

The teaching of religion as an academic discipline, replete with textbooks, curriculum, scope and sequence, assessment, and evaluation is one of the universal hallmarks of Catholic schools. This attention to religion provides students the opportunity to learn about Scripture and the sacraments, the life of Jesus and the saints, the wisdom and traditions of the Catholic faith, and the moral and ethical teachings that follow from such knowledge. This teaching of religion is further developed throughout the culture or ethos of the school, which becomes the broader context for a living faith where the entire school community is involved in worship, service, acts of charity, and the pursuit of justice. It is often said that in a Catholic school, all teachers are religion teachers, not because every teacher has a formal religion class but because teachers teach by the quality of lives they lead and by how they relate to students, parents, and one another. Religion is taught, therefore, both inside and outside the classroom.

Religion matters. This insight is affirmed by Peter Hemming's *Religion in the Primary School*, a qualitative study of the place and importance of religion in two primary schools in northern England. This English context is markedly different from what any Catholic educators in the United States would be expecting. Hemming compares and contrasts two schools using a case study approach to tease out an understanding of purpose, meaning, identity, and engagement. The ethnographic details are thick and rich, including extensive interviews and insightful observations about the role of religion in the everyday practices of the schools. Most interestingly, the student them-

selves emerge as “competent religious and spiritual agents in their own right, capable of reshaping school ethos” (p. 14). Scholarly attention in chapter 8 to the nuances of accommodating religious minorities is particularly helpful and at times provocative.

The two schools differ in that one is a community or public school and the other is Catholic. Hemming discusses at length the historical development of this dual system of schooling throughout the United Kingdom, and his analysis provides considerable impetus to the current study, one that would never be considered in the US given the current understanding of constitutional constraints. As Hemming states, “religion and spirituality have always played a significant role in *all* (emphasis in original) state-funded schools in the UK, reflecting the historical involvement of the churches in the education systems” (p. 7). From the point of view of Catholic educators in the US, the sections of the book describing how religion is contextualized in the community school named Rainbow Hill are especially enlightening for they demonstrate how citizenship, social cohesion, and civic tolerance are served in ways that do not ultimately differ greatly from the explicitly Catholic school named Holy Cross. Indeed, the author concludes based on observable evidence that when it comes to welcoming and incorporating religious minorities into the school community, Rainbow Hill was “able to travel further down the road of recognition and accommodation than the Catholic school” (p. 15).

Perhaps what is most intriguing to this American reviewer is the general acceptance of religion and religious behaviors as standard operating procedure for the common or public school. While realizing that most of the developed world enjoys such an educational structure, it nonetheless raises an eyebrow to encounter such an academic discussion of the pivotal place of religion in the life of a school and to learn about the various challenges and advancements that accrue in such an environment. Secularization in the US may well have provided for the intensification of religious mores in the private sector and the establishment of an entire sector of separate independent schools. But accounting for the absence of religion in the public sector is a more difficult challenge. The exclusion of religion from public schools in the US is problematic on many levels, driving millions of students into faith-based schools. Daily life at Rainbow Hill, however, appears inclusive and welcoming, with its developmental challenges to be sure, but amenable to a diverse constituency in a way that a public school in the US could never be.

For the purpose of understanding the importance of religion through religious education in the primary school, Catholic educators may very well look elsewhere for more in depth analysis. Considering the international perspective, *Catholic Primary Religious Education in a Pluralistic Environment* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015) by Anne Hession comes to mind as a recent, thoughtful discussion of the teaching of religion in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. With a more global outlook, M. Buchanan and A.M. Gellel (Eds.) have offered *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools* (Sydney: Springer, 2015). Both of these texts examine the specific contribution of the teaching of religion in Catholic schools with detailed analysis of contemporary issues in theology, pedagogy, and curriculum theory that inform a renewal of religious education in schools. However, with a view to understanding the role of religion and religious education in wider society, and to appreciating the sociological ramifications of religion in public life, Hemming's two case studies are challenging material. The construction of a school-wide ethos at Rainbow Hill, along with its risks and rewards, raises important questions for all educators regarding the cooperation between home and school in the development of children's values, the relative value of the school functioning in *loco parentis*, providing for the religious and spiritual needs of students and families, and the question of children's rights and autonomy in relation to religion. The details of Catholic life at Holy Cross will strike seasoned Catholic educators as normal and ordinary, with few surprises. Juxtaposing such ordinariness with Rainbow Hill makes for a fascinating discussion, exposing some essential facets of the place of religion in a healthy democracy.

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