

Children's Geographies Book Review

Religion in the Primary School: Ethos, Diversity, Citizenship, Peter J. Hemming, 2015, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 150 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780415714877

Although the relationship between religions and state-funded schooling has a long history there is a relative dearth of academic writing, based on empirical study, which explores the contested spaces of faith-based education and faith in education. Still less which integrates the two. Peter J. Hemming's book, based on his PhD research in both a Community and a Roman Catholic primary school in a multi-faith urban area of North England, does just that. The book centres on two key themes – the place of religion in public life and the implications for religious citizenship in educational settings of the increasing multi-faith nature of national populations. Adding careful empirical work to the contemporary popular and academic debates on these subjects is welcome as, at its best, it shows that some of the arguments about the harms and benefits of faith-based education are simplistic and it critiques assertions about the level and nature of the assumed differences between so-called 'religious' and 'secular' state-funded schools.

Whether religions have a place in public schooling and if so, what that place should be, is a vexed question for many states and conflict over policy in this area draws impetus from a constellation of related debates and fears about migration, social identity and difference, community cohesion and secularisation/post-secularity. This makes the book, and the research which informs it, an important and topical contribution, even if the data is from the period before some of the recent controversies mentioned in the introduction (the research took place in 2007-2008). Those looking for confirmation of their concerns about faith-based education will find it, as will those looking for the affirmation of the value of faith in education. Whilst even-handed in this respect the book is not neutral but rather makes thoughtful arguments based on the ethnographic, interview and drama-based research with young people and their parents and teachers. In line with the new social studies of childhood the research takes a child-centred orientation and so will be of particular interest to children's geographers as Hemming positions the work to contribute to the growing literature on the spaces of childhood religiosity. The focus on primary schools is important and novel but is not itself justified. More could have been made of why the primary school is a particularly relevant or appropriate site for exploring the key themes (as opposed to other types of, or older age-based, formal schooling or informal education).

The introduction to the book sets out the context of the study and offers a detailed history and current snapshot of state-funded religious schooling in the UK with attention to the wider educational landscape and to differences between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Efforts are made to set this, and the literature chapter which follows, into a wider context for a non-UK audience but this tends to be more gestural than integral to the discussion. Key themes of post-secularity, social cohesion and Hemming's conceptual work on religious citizenship are introduced which are picked up through the analysis chapters. This, and the methodological chapter, provide a detailed critical engagement with current literature and will prove a useful introduction to readers new to these ideas and context, as well as setting out how the study took place. The analytical chapters use a comparative approach to stage the interplay of the two sites and types of school, with the first pair of chapters detailing the two very different school ethos models. They also show how shared post-secular values mean that the differences should not be overstated and, perhaps surprisingly, significant commonalities should be acknowledged. The next pair of chapters explore the place of encounters within the school and what this means for community cohesion. These describe the wider repertoire for community-building that the Roman Catholic school is able to draw on but also the problems of social exclusion that result in relation to both schools but particularly in the Roman Catholic school.

Before drawing the book's themes together in the conclusion the penultimate, and I think the strongest, chapter explores the idea of religious citizenship. In terms of an original conceptual contribution, the range and depth of data presented from children themselves and the way in which the contestations described reveal the disruption of the otherwise implicit cultural norms around religions in both settings, this is the chapter that most realises the promise of the book's intentions.

The book successfully argues for and demonstrates the ongoing importance of empirical children-centred approaches to understandings of religions, citizenship and education. I might have hoped for even more from the pupils about the primary school as a place in which the particularity of their faith is explored, expressed and contested. There is still a tendency in work like this to maintain the coherence of 'religion' as a category that sweeps up and flattens out the particularity of young people's often diverse beliefs, practices and experiences. I think Hemming mostly avoids this through empirical nuance but the tension remains implicit in the framing of the research as about 'religion' in the primary school. Another valuable contribution is the comparative approach as it teases out the everyday commonalities of 'religious' and 'secular' schools that theoretical or pedagogic writings are said to overlook or minimise. Those familiar with work in this area, and Hemming's previous published work, are likely to find less in this book that is new. However, the book is shorter and more tightly focused than his thesis and there is a stronger comparative element between the two schools across a wider range of issues than is possible in some of the five published journal articles from which the book draws. The book would suit the reader who wanted a good overview of religions and primary schooling in a UK context, a broader critical discussion of significant literature and the detail that comes from careful empirical work from which implications can be drawn for policy and practitioners. Equally, they would be well served by Hemming's other published material, which for some will prove more easily accessible.

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