

Book Review

Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada

Graham P. McDonough, Nadeem A. Memon, and Avi I. Mintz, editors
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On February 11, 2013 the Vatican announced the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, the first resignation of a Pope in almost 600 years. The morning after the announcement, I was scheduled to teach my undergraduate social studies teaching methods course and thought this was a good time to raise the issue of how to make substantive use of emerging current events in the classroom. It was, I thought, a teachable moment. Shortly after raising the question of how history and social studies teachers might take up the Pope's decision and its implications, I was interrupted by a student who objected to the focus of the class stating, "I was born a Catholic, but the church is pretty much irrelevant to me now. Why should anyone be interested in studying this?" Her statement and question received widespread assent from her peers.

It seems to me that my students' reaction was a popular expression of what some academics have called the "Secularization Thesis, the idea that the rise of modernity [or even post-modernity] necessitates the decline of religion" (Bottum, 2010, p. 63). My experience tells me that on a personal level, religion, or organized religion at least, was pretty much irrelevant to many of the students in that class as well as to large numbers of contemporary Canadians. However, as I tried to point out that morning, while religion might not be personally important to them, it is to many Canadians. Just as importantly for social studies teachers, it continues to be a significant force in the world, and we ignore it at our peril.

One area where religion has had and continues to have substantial influence in terms of public policy is education. As I have written elsewhere, "religion and education are inextricably intertwined" (Sears & Christou, 2011, p. 342) and those connections have defining influence on the structure and processes of education in both the private and public spheres. Unfortunately, many, like my students mentioned above, assume that in Canada, religion's relevance to education is a thing of the past and marginal at best. In this context, Graham P. McDonough, Nadeem A. Memon, and Avi I. Mintz's edited collection, *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada*, is an important contribution to scholarship on education in Canada.

The book includes an introduction and conclusion, and nine chapters that span three main sections: Aims and Practices, Faith and Citizenship, and Dissent and Critical Thinking. Each section includes one article from each of the three faith communities represented in the title of the book. The chapters explicitly take on misconceptions about faith-based schooling, provide a complex and nuanced sense of a range of approaches to that enterprise, and offer some potentially valuable lessons for education and educators beyond faith communities.

In the introduction, the editors argue that the Ontario provincial election controversy of

2007, where Progressive Conservative leader John Tory promised to extend public funding to faith-based schools, illustrates three common misconceptions about faith-based schools: that they are all essentially the same; they are not academically credible; and they “are a threat to social cohesion” (p. 1). The book is largely focused on addressing these misconceptions by providing detailed examples of a range of faith-based schools and their approaches to education, and including instances of how many of these schools “provide students with high-quality academic preparation, meaningful religious instruction, *and* education appropriate for citizenship in a multicultural democracy” (p. 17).

A key distinction made in the book is the difference between single-denominational and interdenominational faith-based schools. The former serves a single and relatively narrow part of a religious community while the latter explicitly attempts to include participants from across different sections of the faithful. Examples of interdenominational schools include the Toronto Heschel School discussed in chapter four and the London Islamic School profiled in chapter six. Rather than being hotbeds of homogeneity, both of these schools seek to include students from families representing a range of practice within Judaism and Islam respectively. Students and their families are asked to think about and address that diversity both in curricular and non-curricular activities in the school. Greg Beiles writes that the Heschel School attempts “to cultivate among students an identity that is at once grounded in its own traditions while at the same time oriented toward the intersubjective requirements of democratic engagement” (p. 103).

A common criticism of faith-based schools is that they are isolationist and therefore detract from rather than add to the pursuit of the common good. A recent Canadian survey of graduates from both governmental and non-governmental (including faith-based) schools confronted that question and found, among other things, that “all of the non-government schooling models match or exceed the government school graduates in the various measures of civic engagement” (Pennings, Sikink, Van Pelt, Van Brummelen, & Von Heyking, 2012, p. 6). The editors of this book provide some rich examples of possible reasons for that finding. Many of the schools profiled address key aspects of democratic citizenship in both the intended and hidden curriculum.

The Heschel School, for example, has a year-long civics course in grade five with a focus on human rights and, in each grade of junior high, students are expected to “carry out *tikkun olam* (social justice) projects” (p. 105). Virtually all of the schools have governing processes that engage members from across the relevant community groups (students, parents, teachers, administrators) in deliberation about important aspects of the school. The diverse community of the Downtown Jewish Day-School profiled in chapter seven, for example, regularly engages in intense debates about “the form and purpose of the Judaic curriculum” and “almost every aspect of school practice, including dress code, dietary policy, the weekly schedule, student admissions, daily prayer, and affiliation with the organized Jewish community” (p. 176). In the conclusion, Mintz argues that the culture of deliberation present in many faith-based schools is educative and healthy both for the school communities and Canadian democratic culture more generally.

Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent has a lot to teach about religious schooling in Canada, and it is valuable in other ways as well. Various chapters of the book also offer potential lessons that public educators can learn from their faith-based colleagues. Space only allows for the consideration of two examples here. Asma Ahmed’s chapter on the London Islamic School provides good background on issues faced by immigrant Muslim youth and their parents as well as some sense of what the school is trying to do to address those issues. Central to the school’s

mission is to help students “find their way, consciously and freely, to a strong and confident Muslim and Canadian identity” (p. 152). Ahmed argues that public schools do not adequately recognize and address the complexities facing students from this community:

For young Muslims growing up in a complex Western society such as Ontario, it is not at all clear that the public schools can provide an entirely adequate learning environment, especially as they do not seem to have any built-in ways to help young people from widely diverse backgrounds to find their cultural and religious ways, and build appropriately diverse identities. (p. 162)

These sentiments echo Lois Sweet’s (1997) findings from almost 20 years ago. Sweet conducted a year-long investigation of religion and schooling in Canada concluding, among other things, that most religious communities and parents did not expect their faith to be promulgated by schools. They wanted faith to be recognized as an important aspect of life. Sweet found that religion and people of faith were largely ignored and marginalized in the public system. Many sent their children to faith-based schools not to isolate them but because, like Ahmed, they hoped their children would develop a secure sense of their own community and personal identity and the ability to use that as a platform for engaging positively with the wider society. Educators in the public system could learn much from the work of the London Islamic School in attempting to achieve this kind of balance.

Graham McDonough’s chapter on teaching controversial subject matter in Catholic schools also provides valuable insights useful beyond faith-based schools. In particular, I found McDonough’s distinction between “intra-Church controversial issues” and “secular-civil controversial issues” (p. 196) helpful in thinking about how to help teachers (especially beginning ones) deal with controversial topics more generally. McDonough points out that intra-Church controversies (the things Catholics disagree about among themselves) are much more difficult to deal with because they engender more intense feelings. In many cases church dogma settles the matter, officially at least. Secular-civil controversies might generate significant disagreement but they do not strike as closely to the core of the faith community as the intra-Church ones do. Finding ways to teach the latter that are faithful to the mission of Catholic schooling and allow for students to honestly and fully express their views is difficult.

Each year I work with nervous pre-service teachers on how to address controversial topics in their classrooms. McDonough’s distinction has helped me think about ways to better do this. Secular communities, it seems to me, have issues that mirror intra-Church controversies. Helping my students make distinctions and introducing them to some of McDonough’s ideas for dealing with the tougher issues has the potential to foster better, more confident approaches to teaching controversial topics.

Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent provides important insights into the nature and scope of faith-based schooling in Canada and provides interesting challenges for educators in the public sector. However, the quality of chapters is mixed and not consistently high. Seymour Epstein’s chapter in the first section, for example, provides a strong overview of Jewish schooling in Canada. He identifies seven kinds of Jewish day-schools, lays out the differences among them, and provides a great introduction for newcomers to the terrain. The following chapter by Mario DeSouza, however, is much different and not at all as friendly for the reader from outside the field. Rather than provide an overview of approaches to Catholic education, DeSouza addresses the move from a Catholic philosophy of education to a Catholic theology of education. The chapter assumes background in philosophy generally and Catholic theology more specifically. While the discussion might be a valuable one, the focus of DeSouza’s chapter is not consistent with either of the others in the section. The other chapters provide more comprehensive

overviews of education within the respective faith communities.

Overall, *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent* seems to be targeted towards a non-specialist audience, those for whom religious and faith-based schooling are relatively unfamiliar. Although the focus is not consistent across the collection, a stronger editorial hand in laying out expectations and providing feedback to the contributing authors might have helped with this problem.

For years American scholar Nel Noddings (1993; 2008) has lamented the woefully poor treatment of religion in American education. As Sweet's work makes clear, that analysis generally holds for Canada as well. As Noddings (2008) points out, "Religion plays a significant role in the lives of individuals, and increasingly is playing a political role that affects both believers and unbelievers. We cannot remain silent on this vital topic and still claim to educate" (p. 386). This is true for students in any school. It is also true for educational policy makers, scholars, and teacher educators. *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada* makes a considerable contribution to addressing an area woefully lacking in Canadian educational scholarship.

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