

Issues in Religious Education,
Edited by L. Broadbent & A. Brown, 2002.
New York: Routledge Falmer, softcover, 235 pages.

This is a collection of 17 essays written by British academics, professional educators, and consultants in religious education. The essays reflect the religious and cultural diversity of Britain, though the names of the contributors do not necessarily reflect this reality, a fact that may have limited the diversity of the essays.

The seven essays of Part I are housed under the title "The Nature of Religious Education Within the School Curriculum." The subject matter of religious education has often been accused of being wishy-washy, and these authors do not shy away from that criticism. One author wonders whether religious education has been able to define itself in pedagogic and educational terms, and what kind of subject it should be if it is to be included in the curriculum. Furthermore, the academic integrity of religious education could suffer at the hands of the particular commitment of the religious educator; on the other hand, religious education without commitment is meaningless. In this regard the issue of assessment of religious education is also discussed, particularly with reference to knowledge and understanding. The challenges of including religious education in the curriculum in a multi-faith school are also included in this section.

The next five essays in Part II are entitled "Religious Education in the Classroom." Issues of development are raised, both social and psychological, and their relationship to cognitive development. The issue of gender is also discussed, particularly in the context of world religions. An essay dealing with religious education for students with special educational needs – SEN – is very welcome because it probes the very depths of the inclusive nature of religion. Religious education might be more weighed down with information rather than knowledge, thus excluding those with special needs. It is also pointed out that the inclusive dimension of religion is not as apparent as it should be.

Finally, Part III has five essays grouped as "Religious Education and the Wider Curriculum." Religious education should develop literacy, knowledge, and other conceptual skills enabling students to distinguish between opinion, facts, and beliefs as well as appreciating the commitment and conviction of religious traditions. Religious education also contributes to a student's moral, social, and cultural development. One of the articles raises the timely question of whether ethical and

moral debate is incompatible with religious education and comes to the conclusion that it is not. The relationship between spiritual development and the curriculum is also explored, particularly in distinguishing and relating learning from and learning about religion. The final essay is especially important in our day when religions and religious practices seems to be tied so closely to identity, politics, and ideology. In such a situation, knowledge of religion and religious practices becomes even more important.

Reviewing a collection of essays even when they are related by a common theme is never easy. In politeness, one should make response to each of the contributors of these essays; it is a courtesy that space does not allow. In some ways this book will be quickly dated; citing reports and statistics is always open to such danger. However, that is more of an observation than a criticism. On the whole, this book has a particular strength: the examination of the role of religious education in the context of a multi-faith, multicultural, and pluralist society. And notwithstanding the three divisions of this book, I would narrow its focus to two main questions, the first of which is: What are the kinds of questions and issues that educators must ask themselves about the nature of religious commitment, open inquiry, and human identity when faced with teaching religious education in a multi-faith context? It is all very well to nod politely towards the democratic niceties of multiculturalism. It is quite another matter to face the more fractious issue of learning to honor one's own religious commitment while at the same time respecting the integrity and dignity of those who subscribe to a different religious system. The essays that deal with the questions in this category invite educators to think critically of how religious identity imbues all of life in all its dimensions, and are beyond simply the questions of academic competency. Furthermore, they also lead the reader to think about the relationship between individual religious commitment and the unity of a theologically and religiously diverse citizenry. In this regard, Britain is a model in placing religious education as part of the school curriculum. This is more than just a respectful nod to pluralism.

And now to my second question: What are the criteria and principles by which one measures the academic integrity and worth of religious education as a subject in the school curriculum? The academic discipline of religious education has often been relegated to the bottom rung of the theological ladder. In the Christian tradition, religious education in schools has often been governed by the *anybody-can-teach-it* mentality.

Such a worldview damages both the place and the academic integrity of religious education. Teachers of physics, history, or German would be suitably worried if the academic integrity of their disciplines were called into question. It is precisely when attempting to speak to all of the experience of life that religious education runs the risk of becoming weak and losing its focus. These essays go a very long way in drawing the attention of religious educators to the epistemological and pedagogic questions that must be asked. Canadian educators of all religious traditions would profit from reading this work, for they too must contribute to the crucial and perennial task of attempting to unite a religiously diverse student body for their role as citizens. It is a task that should include commitment to one's religious tradition. I believe that the teaching of religious education in non-denominational schools should be an area of discussion in Canada, and this book could assist Canadian educators in focusing upon some of the questions and issues that could enliven such a discussion.

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After Literacy: Essays,
by John Willinsky, 2001. New York:
Peter Lang Publishing, softcover, 296 pages.

This collection of essays, written by someone I consider to be one of the leading lights in literacy education in Canada, represents an examination of the role of critical literacy in today's postmodern world of texts, hypertexts, and the information age. What is impressive here is the scope of Professor Willinsky's reach for he is, indeed, someone who reads widely and deeply. In fact, the title of his book, *After Literacy* seems to suggest that there is a point after learning to read and write where literacy seems redundant and out of fashion. However, a careful reading of his introduction suggest otherwise. If I understand him correctly, his view of literacy does not address the issues of learning to read – the great debate – as much as what must happen after one