Have a Little Faith: Religion, Democracy, and the American Public School

BENJAMIN JUSTICE AND COLIN MACLEOD
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. 180 pages.

Have a Little Faith examines the controversial relationship between religion and democracy in U.S. public schools by surveying two centuries of the country's public education from historical and philosophical perspectives. The book provides a rich content that covers topics from the Founding Fathers' ideas of democracy to the American Revolution and its effects on education, as well as religion's role in education today. Benjamin Justice is a professor of history and education at Rutgers University, and Colin Macleod is a professor of philosophy and law at the University of Victoria (Canada). Therefore, this book presents an interdisciplinary work that calls for a "substantive conception of democratic public education" (p. 21), by which the authors imply that the mission and curriculum of schools should support religious diversity.

In that regard, Justice and Macleod take a normative stance and argue that "public schooling can and should be a site for fostering mutual understanding between different faith perspectives, and for the creation of a public with shared values of reasonable compromise and reasoned discourse" (p. 2). In particular, they suggest that Americans need to reconsider the place of religion and democracy in public schools. Although they do not reject the separation of church and state, they do believe that since people learn to become involved citizens through public education, people also can learn differences in faith (including those who have no faith) through a public schooling that supports no sectarian perspective.

The book's focal point is the necessity of inclusive and tolerant public school settings in which all students can learn about different faiths together and with mutual respect. The authors do not claim that they present a straightforward solution for such a complex relationship of religion and education; however, they do defend a democratic educational path that includes non-sectarian religious faith and a public education system that is not a product of "undemocratic majoritarianism" (p. 42).

Their presentation of the history of U.S. public education provides a rich background for readers who have little prior knowledge of it. In their six-chapter book, Justice and Macleod examine public education during four historical periods: the early Republic, the mid-to-late 19th century, the 20th century through the 1950s, and from the 1960s until the present.

The first chapter examines religion and education from a democratic perspective with a philosophical methodology. They invite readers to observe religion's role from a "democratic conception of education in which legitimacy involving mutual justification is taken seriously" (p. 41). They further believe that this democratic consideration is developed with public reason. For example, they argue that the three facets of public reason are significant in the debate of religion in public

schools: regarding other citizens as "free and equal persons," appreciating diversity, and a non-sectarian approach (pp. 28-29). This, the authors think, will enable citizens to focus on the shared interests that can form an inclusive democracy.

In the second chapter, they look at religion and education in the early-Republic era by examining the Founding Fathers' thoughts about religion, which shaped the country's political landscape, making it one in which the idea of separate public and private spheres in education became dominant. Although at that time religion was believed to belong to the private sphere, religious ideas were considered to provide public cohesion, especially at the local level, where certain government policies, such as providing land to churches, demonstrated clear expressions of religiosity.

The chapter presents the diverse ideas of leaders from John Adams and Benjamin Rush to James Madison and Thomas Jefferson on religion and education. However, it emphasizes that the Founding Fathers shared a common concern for an educated public and that they established the tenets of federal and state constitutions that ensured the protection of religious minorities. This was deemed necessary for a diverse civil society, although diversity in religion and politics only appeared during later periods.

The third chapter surveys the advance of common schools during the second half of the 19th century. It provides interesting cases from common schools, which can be seen as the forerunners of public schools and as instrumental in shaping religion's role in education today. The authors stress that common school education included non-sectarian religious culture and acknowledged the authority of God. However, they state, this structure caused problems for minorities who followed a different belief system.

For example, in 1838, a Pennsylvania state law required that the Bible be used as a reader by public school teachers. Some Catholics protested this decision on the grounds that it required their children to read a "Protestant Bible in public" (p. 69). Justice and Macleod's examination of the common school processes comprehensively indicates the "precarious" scope of religion in public education (p. 74). The authors recognize the problem of "the unwillingness of a powerful majority to acknowledge the reasonable objections of a religious minority to the imposition of a majority view of religion" (p. 70).

In this chapter, they also clearly show the evolving trends in 19th-century public schooling due to such factors as demographic changes after the arrival of Irish Catholic immigrants during the 1840s and 1850s, the effects of the Civil War, and the resulting new forms of religious and national identity expression. Although Christian practices remained visible to some extent, the religious tone was changing in public schools, and tendencies toward a more secular-oriented education were on the rise.

The fourth chapter covers the relationship between public education and religion in the 20th century through the 1950s. New developments in science, the rise of diversity and individual rights, and modernization engendered more disputes regarding this relationship. Justice and Macleod argue that since the meaning of

being "American" as well as the beliefs of Americans changed both over time and as the country continued its journey toward a more complex democracy, concepts of public schooling also changed.

The fifth chapter details the developments from the 1960s until today. Justice and Macleod point out the significant changes in mainstream society during this period, such as the Civil Rights revolution, the reactions to public education in favor of privatization and local schooling, and the Supreme Court's increasing authority on educational disagreements. The authors examine and combine a good number of cases and link them to the specific period effectively, as they do throughout the book.

The sixth and final chapter analyzes three important sites of observation in today's education: "student self-expression, inclusion and charters schools and vouchers" (p. 119). Supporting the significant role of public reason as a practice to reach legitimate decisions in public education, this chapter reflects on various methods through which this legitimacy can be achieved. The authors reframe recent areas of disagreements. For example, in the case defined as "incivility in the classroom" (p. 128), they argue that the idea of free expression cannot tolerate hateful messages denouncing a faith or its supporters in schools and maintain that "civil discourse and the psychological safety of all students must prevail" (p. 129).

The authors also refer to new communities that are on the rise, especially "non-Judeo-Christian Americans such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others" (p. 102) in the last two chapters. The need for pluralistic public education is more evident today, and they support an education that provides students with the environment and skill sets they need to discuss their differences (faith or disbelief) with mutual respect.

Overall, Justice and Macleod present an impressive examination of the nearly 250-year-long history of religion in public education in 180 pages. They evaluate how religion's role has evolved and been transformed during this period with many striking examples and by asking meaningful questions. By starting from a theory of democracy and moving into interesting points on the multifaceted and controversial topic of public education and religion, *Have a Little Faith* contributes to the literature by providing concise and salient ideas as well as opening up areas for future research on U.S. public education in relation to religious beliefs.

Ayşenur Sönmez Kara
Associate, Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

doi: 10.2979/jems.1.1.08