

Religious Diversity at School: Educating for New Pluralistic Contexts

EDNAN ASLAN AND MARCIA HERMANSEN

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In the contemporary tapestry of multicultural societies, the recognition of religious pluralism has emerged as an integral component of daily life. What was once perceived as “otherness” during the 1970s and 1980s has undergone a profound transformation, with children from diverse religious backgrounds now acknowledged as essential contributors to cultural identity. *Religious Diversity at School: Educating for New Pluralistic Contexts*, edited by Aslan and Hermansen (2021), delves deeply into this paradigm shift, offering a penetrating examination of the challenges and opportunities faced by educators in navigating the landscape amid globalization and cultural plurality.

Central to the book’s exploration is the pivotal role of teacher training programs in expanding educators’ perspectives and cultivating a deeper understanding of the diverse challenges prevalent in our society. This is exemplified by the introduction of Islamic religious education in public schools and the proliferation of Islamic private schools across numerous European countries, aimed at facilitating the integration of Muslim children into local communities. Throughout the text, the authors emphasize the necessity for comprehensive educator training programs designed to broaden their perspectives and deepen their engagement with religious diversity, thereby countering extremism and fostering mutual understanding.

Despite strides toward religious pluralism, the journey is not void of obstacles. The book underscores the necessity for a thorough examination of one’s faith to achieve genuine pluralism, particularly in the context of marginalized identities in European societies. This initiative not only aids the integration of Muslim students into local communities; it also empowers them to formulate informed opinions, thus fostering a culture of pluralism. Through a series of case studies spanning Europe, Turkey, and the United States, the book urges educators and students alike to engage in “faith development” and reflect on the moral development of children during their formative years. By equipping educators with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of religious diversity, schools can serve as catalysts to nurture critical thinking and foster intercultural

dialogue, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Structured into three sections, the book presents a comprehensive examination of religious diversity within educational environments. In the initial section, a multifaceted exploration unfolds, delving into the varied perspectives of pupils, teachers, parents, and society as a whole. This section accentuates the significance of fostering dialogue and inclusivity to navigate effectively the dynamics of religious plurality. The focus shifts in the second section to confront the challenges posed by religious fundamentalism. Here, the authors meticulously analyze how religious education may be a potent tool to dismantle stereotypes and combat prejudice. The final section offers a series of regional case studies centered on religious education concerning Muslims, in both majority and minority settings. These studies provide insights into the evolving landscape shaped by factors such as immigration trends and political currents.

In the book's introduction, Aslan and Hermansen emphasize the undeniable reality of societal diversity and advocate for both private and public schools to prepare students to navigate this pluralism. They propose religious education as a means to address societal challenges, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. This assertion is supported by a variety of case studies. For example, Hermisson and Gochyev's study on adolescents' perspectives on religion and non-religious world-views highlights a significant social distance between religious and non-religious students, exceeding even the gap between the adherents of the Abrahamic faith.

Subsequent chapters explore the positive role of religion as a coping mechanism for refugees in Germany. Pirner and Bradtke's interviews with young refugee students reveal heightened religiosity among immigrants, necessitating additional support in educational settings, while Aysel's empirical study in Germany examines the diverse roles of religion within families and mosques, showcasing how Islamic religious education can cater to varied expectations. In the "teachers' multi-voiced identity," Ina ter Avest examines the concept of plurality in the context of the Netherlands, noting a rise in religiosity despite secularization trends. She argues that "faith development" is integral to maturation and can be nurtured through genuine encounters and reflections, particularly by religious education during formative years. Collectively, Şenol Yağdı draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to question the orientation of Islamic teachers in

Austrian public schools, probing how religious and interreligious learning take place in religious education classes.

Simojoki sheds light on the challenges faced by vocational schools in Bavaria, Germany, after the influx of refugees in 2015. He underscores the prominent role of instructors and the potential ideological challenges stemming from their backgrounds. His work aims to provide the basis for historical and conceptual considerations on “religious sensitivity” as a basic feature of teacher professionalism in culturally and religiously diverse societies. Meanwhile, the analysis of the Finnish upper secondary level students’ responses reveals that fears of physical or emotional insecurity caused by different lifestyles and values are the main source of students’ prejudices. Finnish scholars advocate for developing student resilience through critical thinking and cooperation, emphasizing the positive influence of educational institutions in echoing diverse worldviews and instilling inclusive values.

In the second section of the book, the authors discuss the challenges and responses to religious pluralism in the classroom. They use case studies to explore how (inter)religious education can empower youth to navigate cultural and religious disparities without compromising their core beliefs. Leveraging a wealth of empirical research and case analyses, the authors illuminate the potential of religious education to transform societal biases and mitigate religious extremism. In this regard, Weirer emphasizes the challenges of fundamentalism in both Christian and Islamic communities in Austria. Demosthenous also elaborates how the growth of religious fundamentalism has challenged the implementation of pluralism and suggests religious education as a means of promoting unity for the benefit of all citizens.

Thus, this section encompasses a diverse array of perspectives, ranging from references to Quranic texts aimed at debunking stereotypes to effective pedagogical strategies designed to combat religious extremism. Additionally, it delves into the experiences of refugees and minorities, highlighting their struggles with discrimination, while also examining how their transition from cultural consumers to cultural producers can foster peaceful coexistence and economic prosperity. By examining the challenges associated with implementing pluralism, this section draws upon real-life examples from the lives of refugees in Germany and Austria, as well as the experiences of minorities in Cyprus and the United States. With these diverse narratives, the authors underscore the multifaceted nature of

religious pluralism and advocate for inclusive educational approaches that promote understanding and harmony amid cultural and religious diversity.

The book's final section presents thirteen regional case studies examining religious education in both Muslim majority and minority countries in Europe. These studies span a diverse geographic range, from the northern nations of England, Sweden, and the Netherlands, to southern and east European countries with significant Muslim populations such as Albania, North Macedonia, Turkey, and Russia. In Western European countries, Islamic religious education addresses the needs of immigrants and facilitates their integration into the society by embracing diverse world views. Conversely, in post-Soviet countries like the Republic of Tatarstan, Albania, and Bulgaria, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere is influenced by the legacy of Communism. The shift from secularism to the accommodation of religious education reflects a departure from the state education systems of Western European counterparts. In these post-communist contexts, religious education is viewed not only as a continuation of religious heritage but also as a means to promote democratic values such as human rights and freedom. In countries like Latvia, where church attendance has declined, younger generations are adopting a practice of "believing without belonging." While this trend reflects a diversity of voices within society, questions persist regarding the content and delivery of religious education curricula. As such, there is still a need to reassess educational approaches and determine how best to navigate the complexities of religious education in evolving societal landscapes.

In conclusion, the prevailing sentiment toward accommodating religious education (RE) in educational settings is generally positive, reflecting a recognition of the importance of addressing religious diversity within classrooms. However, this commendable endeavor is not without its challenges, particularly concerning the development and implementation of curriculum content. While the primary aim of RE is to foster an understanding of diverse worldviews, there exists apprehension regarding the potential dominance of a specific religious denomination. This concern is exacerbated by the influence of prevailing political climates that may inadvertently reinforce tendencies toward religious fundamentalism. As a response to these challenges, some countries, like Austria, have opted to maintain a secular stance within their educational systems. This is achieved through the provision of courses such as Ethics, which aim to cultivate a

neutral platform for exploring ethical and moral principles. By adopting such an approach, these nations seek to mitigate the risks associated with religious bias while simultaneously promoting a more inclusive educational environment conducive to dialogue and mutual understanding across diverse religious and cultural perspectives.

Mahshid Tavallai
PhD candidate in Education
Queen's University
Kingston, Canada

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