

Islam and Education: the manipulation and misrepresentation of a religion by Lynn Revell, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 2012, xi +135pp., £20.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-85856-489-0

This is a timely study, which recognises the importance, not only of religious education curricula itself, but of the means by which religious education is taught, and the significance of the material artefacts of pedagogy as conveyors of values and knowledge about religions. In a sense religious educationists have joined the venture which considers these things rather late, others having recognised the significance of textbooks in this way, for instance, some time ago (Marsden, 2001). No matter, there now seems to be growing cognizance of these things on the part of religious education researchers (for example, Jackson (et al), 2010; Shnirelman, 2012) even if the methodologies are still somewhat underdeveloped.

This is also a book which exposes the unavoidably political (and here overtly politicized) character of religious education. It does so in relation to Islam specifically, not least because it is this religion that is evokes most moral panic at present, and thus knowledge about it is being carefully managed and, Revell argues, manipulated to meet the ends of religious educators and policy-makers as these coincide.

Revell traces the origins of the current curriculum in relation to Islam, through the periods of the birth of the study of religion itself to the time that Islam took its place as a ‘world religion’, and as an element in religious education syllabi. The details of how the remodelled curriculum took shape in the post-war period and into the 1970s, the influences in this direction, the timing and emphases, are moot points (Revell here has a slightly different take than has recently been presented in Parker and Freathy, 2012), but it is clear that in relation to Islam the imperative to foster ethnic (and thereby religious) integration, and the fostering of ‘community cohesion’, are strongest of late.

In subsequent chapters, Revell explores the extent to which the religious education curriculum, specifically reflected in RE textbooks, has flattened out the differences between religions in order to emphasise religions’ essential sameness as a crude application of the phenomenological approach. Likewise, she explores how the tendency to homogenise (intended or not) has colluded with government-influenced requirements to present ‘safe’ notions of Islam, devoid of any of the raw realities of life as a Muslim in the contemporary world. This being the case, young people are both presented with an unreal Islam of the classroom, which conflicts with media and other stereotypes, and little opportunity to explore the questions they may have in relation to the religion, or be challenged by being confronted with the actualities.

At this point the books shifts its focus away from religious education textbooks, and the representation of Islam *per se*, towards the UK Home Office’s *Prevent* strategy, introduced in 2007/8 as means obviating violent extremism. Specifically, chapter four of the volume evaluates the *Prevent* (and its associated agenda) and later the *REsilience* aspect of it – designed to support teachers in the handling of controversial issues. Although *REsilience* goes some way in acknowledging the realities of life as a Muslim (p.92), it is still infected with the relativizing view that Islam is the same as other religion and perspectives which ignore the historical experience of Muslims which lead to the present state of affairs, Revell argues. More worryingly, Revell

observes, when dealing with controversial issues, the materials used by teachers omit mention of Islam, even though the issues under discussion are often ones oft alluded to in relation to Islam. By not making the connection between Islam and certain contentious issues young people are again left with their stereotypes unchallenged and their questions unexplored.

References

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