

Research Space

Journal article

**Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam (Eds.), Religion and Education:
The Forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education? (Brill/Sense,
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Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam (Eds.), *Religion and Education: The Forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education?* (Brill/Sense, 2021)

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Teaching Religious Education (RE) is a demanding enterprise that consumes considerable energy and time. Given this, how does one stay abreast of academic discussions of the nature and purpose of the subject? To do so is important because academic insights have significant implications for syllabus and curriculum design and for teachers' pedagogical practice. Pupils' experience of RE can be radically different depending on the theoretical decisions made by their teacher, but often unconsciously and with little awareness of alternatives. The problem is that the academic discussions are often inaccessible, published either as expensive, heavyweight books or in hard-to-find peer-reviewed journals.

One of the best solutions to this problem is to find a collection of essays by leading thinkers which enables the reader to access the work of a range of key scholars in one place. Gert Biesta and Patricia Hannam have provided just that for RE teachers in this impressive book. Its origin lies in a seminar that they organised in 2017, which they established to shed light on the relationship between religion and education when thinking about RE. Their thesis is that neither religion nor education has been examined carefully enough in much contemporary thinking. The invited contributors each explored an aspect of this theme, drawing on their own frontline theoretical research. The result is a fascinating insight into contemporary discussions that will bring the stretched RE teacher up-to-date in just 161 pages. A particular strength of this collection is that the editors do not leave the reader unsupported in making sense of the different perspectives introduced by contributors. Rather, they offer opening and closing reflections that comment on each through the prism of their interest in the relationship between religion and education in RE. Furthermore, they invited Joyce Miller, one of the matriarchs of modern RE, to add her perspective as rapporteur to the seminar. Miller's perspective is particularly valuable in that she draws on her experience of serving as a member of the Commission on RE and thereby relates the seminar contributions to that later influential report.

Although it is a false binary, the contributions can be roughly divided into those that focus on the nature of education and those that focus on the nature of religion. On education, Gert Biesta introduces the reader to his three-fold prism for understanding education and applies it specifically to RE. Patricia Hannam develops this thinking through her emphasis on education bringing the child to action not just to reason by focusing on what it means to live a religious life. Ruth Heilbronn reflects on the nature of a democratic education. David Aldridge uses his hermeneutical stance to propose a pedagogy of belonging. David Lewin then addresses the challenge of content overload by suggesting a theory of pedagogical reduction. On religion, Denise Cush and Catherine Robinson argue that the way in which it is generally conceptualised in RE is inadequate by focusing on Buddhism. Farid Panjwani and Lynn Revell propose a related issue in relation to Islam, where representation in the classroom too often gives an essentialised picture that is not true to many Muslims' experience. Sean Whittle argues theology in Catholic RE fails to represent the living faith. Finally, Bob Bowie engages in a specific discussion of the way in which GCSE question setting distorts the representation of religion in the students' study of sacred text.

This summary may make the relevance of these chapters for the RE classroom hard to see. Bowie's contribution is the clearest in this respect in showing how exam board assessment strategies can

distort both understandings of education and religion. Lewin's chapter is highly significant in its facing up to the problem of how RE teachers make decisions about including or excluding particular content. Cush, Robinson, Panjwani and Revell show how easy it is to misrepresent religions by the framing teachers adopt in the classroom. Heilbronn, Aldridge, Biesta and Hannam offer critical insights into how current fashionable understandings of knowledge-rich curriculum might be challenged in ways that would change pupils' classroom experience. Finally, Whittle offers a different conception of classroom Catholic RE from the current orthodoxy. For the enquiring RE teacher there are gems to be mined in this collection that will lead to new classroom approaches. Theory does make a difference in practice.

This reviewer wholeheartedly recommends this book as a doorway into the current theoretical discussions about the nature and purpose of RE. This is not a promise of an undemanding read, but it is a promise of an entry point into some leading thinkers' stimulating ideas.

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