

Reviewer: Andrew Peterson

Review of the Book: "Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion: An Exploration of Challenges and Opportunities"

Michael Grimmett, ed.

Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons 2010, 336 pages

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Religious education and social and community cohesion is an interesting project which has resulted in a timely and thought-provoking text. In recent times there has been a good deal of interest in the place of religion and faith in public life, policy and education and, in particular, in the affect (positive or otherwise) which religion and faith have on social and community cohesion. This excellent book significantly adds to this debate. Wide-ranging in its scope, and what the editor declares will be his last book in a long career in religious education, Michael Grimmett has successfully brought together a cohesive and significant text which should be of interest to a wide audience. In his introduction Grimmett makes clear his thinking behind the project: 'a seismic shift in the social, political, religious, moral and ethnic landscape of the UK in the last decade has presented RE with a new and still to be addressed challenge and has shown... that current theories and practice in RE are no longer entirely sufficient to address the very different circumstances created by the emergence of what I will call '*globalised and politicised religion*' (10). The chapters contained within the collected edition explore and interrogate issues around social and community cohesion and their implications for religious education in schools. The text is particularly successful in charting the changing nature of the teaching RE since the 1944 Education Act (a time which has witnessed a transition from the confessional, to the secular, to what might loosely be termed the 'post-secular'), and it does so in a way which brings the recent history of RE teaching to bear on the role of the subject in building social and community cohesion in the contemporary context.

Readers will be struck immediately by the standing and quality of the contributing authors, most of whom are significant names in the field of religious education and the wider field of educational research. After a preface by the editor, the book comprises 16 chapters. On reading these, one recognises that the editors and the authors have achieved a feat which is sometimes missing from collected editions - namely, a sense of shared interest and focus alongside individually valid and valuable contributions. Across the text, and even within individual chapters, the authors explore

issues concerned with philosophical and conceptual understanding, public and educational policy, curriculum and pedagogy. In short, the breadth and depth is both significant and impressive. The editor's decision to author both the introductory and concluding chapters was wise, and brings a sense of cohesion and synthesis which is so often lacking from collections such as this.

Aside from the clarity and insightfulness of the analyses offered, the authors involved in this edition have some important things to say. Though it would not be possible to consider all of the undoubted strengths here, three are particularly noteworthy. The first is the identification of religion and faith as playing a significant and important role in public life and, in turn, of the role which religious education does and could play in schooling and education. Whether this represents a process of continuation, revival or resurgence of the role of religion in public life is an interesting debate and is touched open in some detail in a number of the chapters (see in particular the chapters by Michael Grimmett, Liam Gearon, Andrew Wright and Clyde Chitty). The second strength, alluded to previously, is the text's combination of conceptual analysis, curricular and pedagogy. There are clearly some deep philosophical issues at play, and these are handled with clarity and in an accessible way throughout. The extent to which they are related to policy (see for example the chapters by Terence Copley and Geoffrey Walford), curriculum (see for example the chapter by Marius Felderhof and Simone Whitehouse and that by John Rudge) and pedagogy (see in particular the chapter by Vivienne Baumfield) is impressive. The third strength, sometimes implicit and at others very much explicit, is that each chapter has implications for the education and professional development of teachers of Religious Education. Such issues are multifarious, but crucially involve the development of the requisite knowledge, understanding, teaching methods and relationships necessary to permit RE in schools to meet the challenges of supporting social and community cohesion.

Although each chapter is presented as an original contribution, if one was being highly critical it could be asked whether the book could have benefited from a more overtly radical element (in this sense there was little in the book which really challenged my way of thinking on the matters at hand). This may however be unfair to the aims and purpose of the text, which the editor identifies clearly as a reader for those interested in the subject areas at hand. Certainly, those coming to this text (from both an English context but also those working outside of England) will gain great benefit from the interesting, insightful and critical analysis of central issues facing the teaching of religious education in England today. I highly recommend it.