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## Book Review: Religion in the Classroom: Dilemmas for Democratic Education

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Religion in the Classroom: Dilemmas for Democratic Education

Jennifer Hauver James, with Simone Schweber,  
Robert Kunzman, Keith C. Barton, and Kimberly Logan  
New York, NY: Routledge, 2015  
102 pages; \$155 USD (hardcover), \$41.95 USD (paperback)  
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Reviewed by Dung Q. Tran, Seattle University

Religion, as a historical phenomenon, is an influential force (Depoy & Gilson, 2007, p. 46; Mitias, 1998, p. ix) that constitutes human experience and constructs reality (Hopkins, 2005, p. 27). Regardless of religious identity, one's perspective on the strengths and shortcomings of religion informs values, shapes understandings, and guides decisions (Pesut, 2012, p. 78). Consequently, given the diversity of human experiencing, students and teachers bring a wide range of religious worldviews and traditions to the classroom. While religion is ubiquitous, thoughtful conversation regarding the role of religion and its' impact on the teaching-learning process in the public school classroom is difficult to have, and often avoided.

To that end, in their timely and thoughtful book, *Religion in the Classroom: Dilemmas for Democratic Education*, Jennifer Hauver James and her colleagues courageously, "break the silence around religion in the classroom" (James, Schweber, Kunzman, Barton, & Logan, 2015, p. 95). They examine important issues that emerge when religion, teaching and learning converge in the classroom. By blending personal vignettes, theory, and the voices of students and educators, the authors model, and hope to provoke thoughtful conversation among in-service teachers, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and all other educational stakeholders, about the complex contours involving religion and its' role in education and society.

The book consists of nine chapters—five of them written by James and four others authored by academic colleagues. In the opening chapters, James prepares the ground for the ensuing conversation by contextualizing her desire for understanding the intersection of religion and the teaching/learning process in a democratic society. Following a discussion of her theoretical vision of democratic education and how that perspective is concretized in subsequent chapters, James examines the legal and ethical aspects of an educator's work. She then investigates the ways in which Christianity continues to shape the structures, practices, patterns and pedagogies of public schools. After reflecting on a number of educational dilemmas raised by her colleagues, James concludes with a call for further collaboration and dialogue, so that teachers can create more inclusive classroom spaces, where democratic living and learning can flourish.

In the first chapter, the principal author prefaces her exploratory inquiry by recalling a series of challenging and perspective-changing conversations with a student that inspired this book project. In response to questions about the meaning of being a good citizen and how humans understand what good citizenship involves, an aspiring teacher in James' early childhood social studies methods course, offered a response that "eloquently and vehemently opposed democracy" (James et al., 2015, p. 2). While her student's claims about democracy were troubling, James was equally concerned about the student's feelings of exclusion and "accusations that those of us claiming to be 'democratic educators' were acting in hypocritical ways" (p. 3). After some difficult discussions, both teacher and student realized that the path toward greater understanding required less talking and telling, and more asking and listening – one of many key insights from this slim and accessible volume.

Chapter two is an outline of James' vision for democratic education. In her view, a democratic education, "aims to move young people toward mutuality and a strong internal foundation – toward civic mindfulness" (James et al., 2015, p. 12). Since the intersection of religion, teaching, and learning can be predicament prone, James argues that, "we ought to ask ourselves whether our response will facilitate or hinder democratic learning" (p. 12). In an effort to help educators navigate the often nuanced and entangled relationship between religion and education, the third chapter offers an overview of the legal and ethical dimensions about religion in the classroom. For James, a rudimentary understanding of basic legal and ethical principles can help an educator. Despite this complex educational landscape, James urges us to "act with care and mindfulness, humility, and caution," since it is in this

place where “ethical practice has the greatest chance to grow” (p. 22). James charts an ethical way forward, in the fourth chapter, by deconstructing “The Not-So-Hidden Curriculum of [Christian] Religion in Public Schools” (pp. 23-38). After a critical parsing of the prevailing discourse - in both the scholarly and popular literature - regarding religion’s persistence in schools and its implications for democratic education, James concludes that Christianity “continues to serve as the public school’s moral compass and normative frame within which institutional and pedagogical decisions are made” (p. 36). In order to achieve the mutuality and civic mindfulness envisioned by democratic education, James calls on all educational constituents to dedicate time and energy to rethinking “the prevailing practices and values at work in their school buildings, and ask critical questions about their limits and consequences” (pp. 36-37). Additionally, James implores all educators to disrupt and dismantle “inequitable practices and discourses that perpetuate them” (p. 37).

The second half of this work will likely be of interest to both scholars and practitioners of Catholic education as James’ colleagues critically explore important issues related to the intersection of religion, teaching, and learning. In chapter five, Kimberly Logan shares the results of her qualitative narrative inquiry, which examines how the religious beliefs about teaching as a calling shaped the educational experiences of pre-service teachers during their studies at a large, public university in the southeastern United States (James et al., 2015, pp. 40-41). The four participants were “in their early twenties, female and traditional undergraduate students completing their senior year of college” (p. 41). Logan’s data analysis indicates that the religious perspectives and sense of calling of these aspiring teachers informed their understandings of and approaches to teaching. The study’s findings also show that each participant’s personal and professional sense of self, as revealed in their “*narratives about teaching* and *narratives about being Christians* overlapped” (p. 51). However, though the participants were edified by the opportunity to reflectively discuss their Christian beliefs, they were unclear about what was possible in public school settings. This finding led Logan to suggest that teacher training programs find ways to “encourage self-reflexivity, understanding, and dialogue” among education students “to discuss the import and influence of their religious beliefs, for themselves and their students” (p. 51).

Reflective academics, educational leaders, and practitioners will enjoy the chapters devoted to the role of religion in student identity, student learning, curriculum design, and democratic dialogue. In chapter six, Simone Schwe-

ber, contends that “students’ religious identities matter in their interpretations of what they’re learning, and that sometimes, necessarily, as teachers we miss the ways that those identities shape meaning-making in our classrooms” (James et al., 2015, p. 59). After describing how religious ideas impact a student’s engagement with curriculum on the conscious, self-conscious, and unconscious levels, Schweber calls on educators to create classroom spaces where students feel safe enough to surface deeply held beliefs. This could enable students to dialogically explore, “how their religious identities help them make meaning and how it shapes their understandings of each other and the world” (p. 60). As far as Schweber is concerned, this pedagogical practice is “a form of teaching for social justice and democratic participation” (p. 59) – a claim that coheres with the guidance offered by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2015; 2008) in their documents about the civic responsibility of Catholics and the framework for catechetical formation of adolescents.

Composed by Keith Barton, chapter seven ponders the place of religion in public school curriculum. He highlights three shortcomings in contemporary treatments of religion: “static and essentialized portrayals of world religions; ethnocentric interpretations of religions; and lack of attention to the political, social and psychological dimensions of religion” (James et al., 2015, p. 62). Despite the existence of “significant obstacles” (p. 77) and lack of simple solutions, Barton believes that schools must offer a more dynamic and comprehensive approach to the teaching of religion. He recommends revising public school religion curricula to include the following: “the range of religious beliefs and practices locally and throughout the world; the diversity found within religions, and their change over time; the meaning that religions hold for individuals beyond doctrine and scripture; and the social, political, and psychological uses of religion” (pp. 76-77).

The eighth chapter, written by Robert Kunzman, presents a fourfold conceptual framework for dealing with ethical certainty in democratic dialogue. These four “conceptual distinctions” (James et al., 2015, p. 82) – demonstrating respect through understanding, distinguishing between public and private realms of ethical commitment, exercising open-mindedness, and committing to continued conversation – are meant to “open the door to the demanding work of appreciating unfamiliar ethical perspectives, demonstrating civic humility and cultivating civic friendship” (p. 87).

In the ninth and final chapter, James encourages us to continue thinking and to carry the conversation into our schools, homes, and communities

(James et al., 2015, p. 95). This volume is apropos given the shifting dynamics and polarizing rhetoric driving the religious, educational, and political discourse in the United States. In a survey of over 35,000 Americans, the Pew Research Center (2015) found that “older cohorts of adults...are being replaced by a new cohort of young adults who display far lower levels of attachment to organized religion than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations did when they were the same age” (p. 6). On the educational front, President Barack Obama recently signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, a bipartisan replacement to the much maligned, *No Child Left Behind Act*, giving states and districts more responsibility and autonomy in shaping educational policy. Perhaps the most glaring example of why this text is so desperately needed is the hostile climate of the current American presidential election campaign, where dialogue has devolved into shouting matches and demonization allowed to run amok. These developments are crucial considerations as educational stakeholders continue the conversation about religion, teaching and learning in the contemporary classroom. While this work could have been strengthened by chapters about religion in culturally and linguistically diverse public school settings and how administrators are approaching this topic, the educational community owe the authors a debt of gratitude for initiating an important and worthwhile conversation about the role of religion in the contemporary classroom.

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