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## Critical Issues in Religious Education, edited by Oliver Brennan

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reading. The author evokes many great images and moments in sports over the last 60 years and meshes them into one tale of an American ethos of sport. The educator of American history will find these stories excellent for capturing the soul of the nation in the late 20th century while providing rhetorical questions on the nature and meaning of sport.

While Jay admits in her introduction that “[s]ome of this information is not new” (p. 2), one could argue that most of the content in this text is nothing new to the reader. This is especially true considering the vast amount of research and books available on this subject as well as the constant inundation of sports by ESPN and other sports media in this country. Jay has artfully compiled these moments and issues, but does not really draw any new conclusions—at least none that most people likely to read this book have seen. This, however, is probably not the author’s intent.

While Jay is critical of abuses in sports over the years, she is careful not to overextend, letting the reader draw his or her own conclusions. “Even as televised spectacle, even as a prepackaged entertainment to sell consumer goods, sports offer moments of transcendence and a sense of powerful possibility” (p. 242). Jay decides to err in favor of sports being a positive thing overall. Television has increased sports’ exposure, but the same problems exist and the games go on.

*Wade Laffey is principal of St. Joseph Catholic School in Enid, OK.*

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## CRITICAL ISSUES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

OLIVER BRENNAN, ED.  
VERITAS HOUSE, 2005  
\$12.44, 124 pages

*Reviewed by Jocelyn Pierre-Antoine*

*Critical Issues in Religious Education* is a book that takes into consideration the cultural context of today’s society and provides a new perspective on religious education. A series of three experts in religious education investigate

the following areas: the characteristics and influences of our modern day culture, the pre-existing approaches to religious education, what it means to teach religion, and the connection between the study and practice of religion. The final section of the book challenges the current belief of the Trinity in the Church and introduces a post-modern interpretation.

In the first chapter, Brennan describes the factors that have a direct influence on culture, such as the move toward economic growth that inevitably contributes to societal change. The author then goes on to identify the distinct characteristics of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern eras. The premise for the rest of the book is centered on the current post-modern day culture in which Murphy emphasizes “a renewed sense of the importance and irreducibility of community does not deny the significance of the individual; rather, the conception is that the individual cannot be understood apart from his or her role in the community” (p. 23). This understanding of the cultural context of the present provides insight to the attitudes and ideas that young people value. In educating today’s youth, it is important to be aware of the fact that they are searching for a more personalized approach to religion that moves away from institutions toward a more diverse view of religion that is accepting of multiple perspectives.

The next section carefully analyzes the purpose of religious education in Ireland and identifies the problems with the current model. The book explains, “Religion needs to be central to family life, work life and leisure life. Indeed, coming from the Latin *religio*, the word religion means tying together, knitting together, that is, bringing together all the different facets of our lives” (p. 41). This leads to two goals of religious education: to teach the beliefs and practices that help people to be religious and to expose individuals to the academic subject of religion. It is the responsibility of the community of faith to introduce children to the traditions, values, and rituals of the faith. The study of religion, on the other hand, is another subject in the curriculum that students learn in school. In the United States, the teaching of religion is placed solely in the hands of various religious institutions. Ireland, however, relies on schools to provide religious education to the children. This area in the curriculum is not seen as a priority, and schools lack sufficient resources for religious education. Irish educators also vary in their interpretation of the term, religious education, and its main purpose. To address these issues, a well-known religious educator, Moran, who has been active in the field for over 30 years suggests, “religious education has a dual nature: formation in being religious and understanding religion” (p. 57). Moran believes that there is a valuable connection between the family and the community’s efforts to support a child’s religious lifestyle and the classroom, which contributes to his or her knowledge about religion.

Chapter 3 investigates the role of the teacher in regard to religious education in the Republic of Ireland. According to Scott, the schoolteacher facilitates learning with students by allowing them the opportunity to explore their own understanding of the world. The classroom is a place where discussions on various perspectives are welcomed and shared. The school environment invites questions and criticisms in an effort for the teacher and students to search for truth together. This model of learning complements the cultural context that was previously discussed because it allows children the freedom to explore different viewpoints and formulate their own understanding of the world. Scott states,

A schoolteacher's vocation is not to tell people what the truth is or to tell them what to believe; a schoolteacher's modest task is to explore the meaning of what is written from the past and to help students articulate their own convictions....The teacher of religion teaches the subject matter. He or she aids in the understanding of texts. What the student does with this understanding (affirm or dissent) is up to the individual student. The personal faith of the student or teacher is not an assumed part of the academic process nor its intended goal. (p. 75)

According to this viewpoint, there is a need for schoolteachers to be more objective in their approach to religious education and to allow students the opportunity to develop their own understanding. In order for this to occur, teachers must encourage students to explore their religious values and traditions in relation to other belief systems.

The fourth section begins with a discussion on the religious tension involved with the traditional teachings of the Church in a culture that is post-modern. With the youth in Ireland moving away from Church traditions, there is a need to develop a system in religious education that recognizes the contemporary culture that goes beyond the classroom setting. The book suggests that the most effective approach to religious education is for the community of faith, which includes the parish and family, to actively live the values and beliefs of the Church for the children, while the teacher provides the students with an opportunity to study the subject of religion from various points of view.

Although this reviewer understands the value of exposing students to different perspectives and challenging them to develop their own ways of thinking, it is necessary for children to be firmly rooted in the values, traditions, and practices of their own faith before venturing into the actual study of other religions in the formal classroom setting. Indeed, there is a need for people to learn about various religions of the world, especially in a post-September 11th period when major conflicts center on religion; however,

people would be better able to compare their religion and other religious perspectives if they have a clear understanding of their own. In fact, guidelines pending before the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) prohibit teaching a free-standing class on world religions in Catholic high schools for this very reason.

The critical issues that are addressed in this book are not as applicable to the United States. The religious model that was established in England and Wales in the 1940s has influenced Ireland's approach to religious education. The study of religion has been adopted in these areas of the world as part of the standard curriculum. With the political issues that have created a distinct separation between church and state in our country, only religious institutions have the freedom to provide a foundation for religious education to children. This book would provide useful information for youth ministers and high school religion teachers who are eager to gain a better understanding of the realities of today's youth, and the influence that it has on their view of religion. It would also allow these educators to reflect on their own perspectives on the purpose of religious education programs in comparison to another part of the world.

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## **A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO EDUCATION LAW: THIRD EDITION**

MICHAEL IMBER & TYLL VAN GEEL  
LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, 2004  
\$39.95, 344 pages

*Reviewed by Andrew Sicnolf*

In *A Teacher's Guide to Education Law: Third Edition*, the authors Imber and Van Geel have added to their previous editions more of the topics of greater importance to present-day schools. Among the issues addressed are the No Child Left Behind Act, school vouchers, race relations in school, and equity and adequacy of school finance. The book covers the hot topics of today's