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Book Review: Teaching Religious Literacy: A Guide to Religious and Spiritual Diversity in Higher Education

Tecora Rogers Harper
DePaul University, trogers7@depaul.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

Teaching Religious Literacy: A Guide to Religious and Spiritual Diversity in Higher Education

Ariel Ennis

New York and London: Routledge, 2017

92 pages; \$75.00 (hardcover)

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<https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-Religious-Literacy-A-Guide-to-Religious-and-Spiritual-Diversity/Ennis/p/book/9781138635852>

Reviewed by Tecora Rogers Harper, DePaul University

Many believe the purpose of higher learning institutions is to acquaint students with the ideologies and philosophies necessary to navigate through the vicissitudes of life and society (Ennis, 2017; Nash, 2001). The globalization of our society creates a sense of urgency on university campuses to ensure that an appreciation of differences in the ever-expanding multicultural environment is maintained. The close proximity of people who have historically had significant differences based upon their religious and cultural beliefs, creates tensions that organizations are often ill-equipped to address. Understanding that universities are among the most effective environments to address issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality and religious identity, Ennis (2017), in *Teaching Religious Literacy*, explores how to create a safe space for discussions about religious and spiritual diversity. According to Ennis many institutions, fearing the loss of funding based upon issues of separation of church and state, have effectively avoided discussions surrounding religious and spiritual issues. Ennis further suggests that not addressing these issues within an educational context denies students access to the tools necessary to engage with diversity challenges throughout their life and career.

Creating a Faith Zone

In his work as Assistant Director at NYU's Of Many Institute for Multi-faith Leadership, Ennis worked very closely with Marcella Runell Hall to successfully build a case for understanding religious literacy. In this brief and

comprehensive pedagogical guide, Ennis (2017) defines religious literacy as: "...the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersection of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses" (p. 7). Through this collaboration between Ennis, Hall and several other colleagues, Faith Zone was created (p. xiv). Faith Zone is a framework developed to facilitate "conversations about religious and spiritual identity" (p. xiv). Its purpose is to create discourse among people of various religious and spiritual identities and an understanding of religious literacy. Ennis' approach focuses on the "four pillars to religious literacy: knowledge, ecumenical orientation, self-awareness and reflection, and application" (p. 9). Ennis guides the reader through a detailed description of each of these pillars and how they are essential to the success of Faith Zone.

This book is based on a seven-year longitudinal study of college students across the United States. The study provided essential insights into "students' level of engagement with religious and spiritual needs" (p. xii). Ennis concluded that religion and spiritual issues are too often dismissed or greeted with contemptuous ridicule. Further findings were that "American college students are far more religiously and spiritually committed than people expect," supporting the critical need for this book and the program it outlines (p. xiii).

Although Ennis's (2017) work focuses on the study, it clearly articulates and brings to life the idea of Faith Zone which was created by Hall and further developed by Ennis. Faith Zone demonstrates a more deliberate approach to conceptualizing religious literacy which is critical to engaging in multi-faith dialogue. Ennis's work also provides a detailed definition of religious literacy and it demonstrates how the Faith Zone curriculum can be presented in a three-hour workshop setting. Ennis appropriately admits that the volume of information on the topic of religious literacy cannot possibly be shared in a three-hour session however, Faith Zone allows for a solid and focused foundational beginning to teaching religious literacy. Ennis also outlines how Faith Zone was implemented at NYU and how it can be customized and implemented in various other environments. Finally, the author provides a sample assessment tool and he allows workshop participants and facilitators to highlight their experiences with Faith Zone.

Discussions about religion, spirituality, race and politics often generate emotionally charged responses yet Ennis presents an approach that mitigates the natural responses to difficult conversations. On the other hand, he highlights the critical skills required of the workshop leader and their ability to effectively facilitate these events.

Diversity Strengthens Us

Ennis's concern about the climate of diversity on university campuses across the United States is valid. He recognizes the critical need within our society to understand the differences among us. This book does an excellent job articulating the need and demonstrating a definitive approach to filling a void that had not previously been addressed. As an educator, I am particularly impressed with the tools developed to measure the success of Faith Zone. As with any new program, having a tool in place that can successfully capture and analyze the progress of a student's development is important. Ennis, utilizing the four pillars of religious literacy as a guide, developed a rubric to measure the growth of a student's learning. Ennis devotes a full chapter to sharing the rubric, providing the data collected and displaying his very impressive results.

As an African American reader, I fully expected to encounter an introduction of race and religion as part of Faith Zone. I was taken aback when by the time I reached Chapter 7, Ennis had not presented the topic of race as part of his program. He should be commended for noting the difficulty that exists in being truly responsive to marginalized groups. Historically the lives and challenges of marginalized groups are often overshadowed by the concerns of the dominant culture in the United States. Although there is minimal attention given to the role race plays in religious literacy, the experiences of people of color are significant to understanding religious literacy and how it shapes the lives of people of all cultures. For example, Black Theology addresses the challenges of African Americans in a way that gives voice, value and attention their religious experience (Cone & Wilmore, 1993).

Although Ennis's (2017) list of references is impressive, the absence of works by Black Theologians that could have given Faith Zone a perspective that may have proved useful, was disappointing. According to Ennis (2017) NYU's commitment to having an open dialogue about diversity is apparent through "NYU in the Zone" (p. 59). Understanding the history of race in the United States helps me to understand how NYU's "Diversity Zone", a zone that "explores issues that surround race and racism", may be successful without a discussion of religion or spirituality (p. 59). However, understanding the role religion plays in issues surrounding race and racism, makes it difficult to understand how Faith Zone can be effective without any mention of race in the context of religion.

This is such a remarkable book that I hesitate to comment on its shortcoming, particularly because the author has already recognized it. However,

it is because he was aware of this need, yet he did not address it head-on, that makes his lack of attention conspicuous by its absence. Ennis (2017) argues that “Beyond simply providing programs and services, we should be asking deep questions about the content that we are conveying and the long-term outcomes we want to accomplish” (p. 5). A review of the curriculum provided, based upon Ennis’s desire to deeply question their approach, suggests an antithetical result to his initial intention to “construct tools that enable deep dialogue” across complex religious and spiritual groups (p. 3).

Conclusion

Finally, this text addresses a concern that has essentially been ignored. Discussions on religious and spiritual issues can in many cases be intense; however, the expansion of our global community urges us to develop better channels for communication and I believe this text moves us in a positive direction. The text is a well-developed justification for religious literacy education and one I would recommend for every college campus.

References

- Cone, J. H., & Wilmore, G. S. (1993). *Black theology a documentary history: Volume one: 1966–1979*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Nash, R. J. (2001). *Religious pluralism in the academy: Opening the dialogue*. New York: Peter Lang.

Tecora Rogers Harper holds a MA degree in African American Religious History and Culture and is a doctoral candidate in DePaul’s Curriculum Studies program at the College of Education. Correspondence regarding this review can be directed to Ms. Harper at: trogers7@depaul.edu.