Teaching Religion, Teaching Truth

Approaches to dialogue

This review by Robin Richardson was first published in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, 2013. It is of *Teaching Religion, Teaching Truth: theoretical and empirical perspectives*, edited by Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins and Mualla Selçuk. The book was published in 2012 in Bern, Switzerland by Peter Lang AG, £38.00, pbk, 281 pp, ISBN 978-3-0343-0818-2.

'World events at the dawn of the twenty-first century,' observe the editors at the start of this compilation of essays, 'have clearly laid to rest some of the overblown claims of the secularisation theorists of the 1960s. Belief in God is not dead, and religion has not retreated to the personal domain and given over the public square to the exclusive claim of secular voices. Rather, the importance of religion is again recognised as a matter of public significance and social concern. In this context the role of religious educators has also grown in public significance (p.ix) .'

It is a stirring and self-confident start. Clearly the book is likely to be of substantial interest and importance. But already in their preface the editors make statements and declarations that invite questions and challenge. 'No longer,' they say, 'is it sufficient to teach about the history of religions …[and] the observable outward phenomena of religions' (p.ix). But was it ever? 'Truth claims can lead to harmony and to peace,' they continue, 'but may also engender discord and violence' (p.x). But is not the reverse also frequently the case, namely that competing truth-claims are engendered by discord and violence which arise from competing material interests?

'What ultimately counts is how one set of truth-claims confronts or embraces the truths claimed by other, different voices. Therefore those who teach religion cannot avoid dealing with matters of truth' (p.ix). But is the essential choice adequately encapsulated with the confront/embrace dichotomy? Are there not other significant choices and decisions to be considered, encapsulated with terms such as negotiation, dialogue, accommodation, coexistence, self-criticism, intercultural awareness, engagement? And in so far as competing truth-claims have their sources in different social locations and competing material interests, is it not the case that secular voices continue to have deeply significant contributions to make in public space? The reader turns to the main body of the book hoping that these and similar questions are going to be addressed.

The book has its origins in the sixteenth conference of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values, hosted by the University of Ankara. It contains 14 chapters, two of which are co-authored. The first five are about theological and philosophical issues and are by Catholic and Protestant scholars. The next three are by Islamic scholars and are similarly about theological

matters. The Muslim community, Recai Doğan points out, 'accepts itself as one community among other communities created by Allah. There are many examples in Islamic history which show the acceptance of this understanding' (p.110). He adds: 'The responsibilities of education involve not only that of transmitting the tradition to new generations, but also that of raising individuals who can improve this understanding. There is therefore an important role for education in reviewing the tradition that is inherited from the past' (p.111).

There are then five essays on empirical and pedagogical matters, of which four are by Christian scholars and one by an Islamic scholar. They include the findings of an ethnographic study of the experiences of young people growing up in religiously-mixed families in Britain; a study based in Germany of a broad international database covering ten countries and three religions, and within Christianity three different denominations, in relation to distinctions between monoreligious, multireligious and interreligious perspectives, and between what the author calls religious saliency, religious openness and religious stress; a discussion of the role and importance of non-conscious learning, drawing in particular on Australian contexts and including reference to the ways in which unconscious bias is, or may be, related to social location and context, and to unequal power relations; an empirical study of the connections for participants in a Parliament of World Religions conference between the Myers-Briggs concept of psychological types and the theological distinctions between exclusivism, inclusivism, multireligiosity and interreligiosity; and a quantitative study of the attitudes of Turkish teenagers to non-Muslim religious traditions.

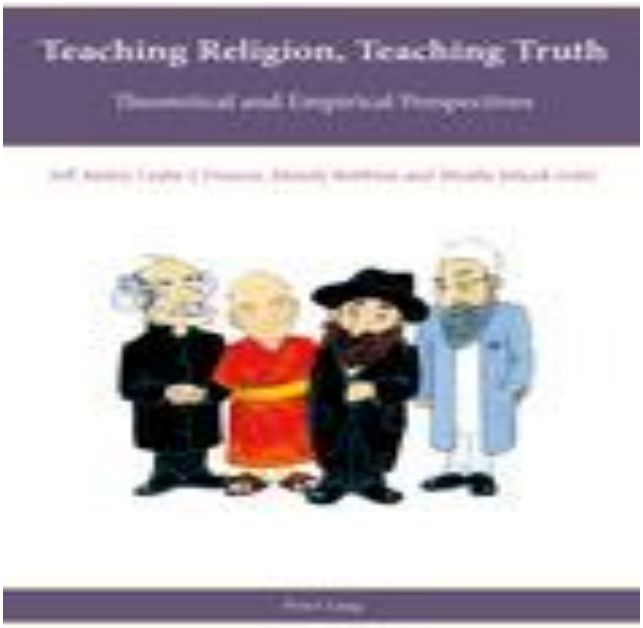
Finally, there is a theological reflection on the nature of religious truth by one of the editors, Jeff Astley. Of the 16 different authors, five are based in Britain, four in Turkey, two in Germany, two in the United States (one of whom writes about Latin American contexts and experiences), two in Australia and one in Canada.

The theology of religions, notes Astley in his concluding chapter,' is often situated within some form of dialogue between religions' (p.259). Indeed, the weight of the essays in this book is strongly against exclusivism and particularism — 'the concept of religious exclusivism,' explains Üzeyir Ok, 'denotes that the adherents of a particular faith will be redeemed, whilst the rest of humanity will be deprived of such salvation or divine reform' (p.223). Rather, the weight of the book as a whole is in favour of interreligious dialogue.

The key tenets for such dialogue, Ok maintains, include these: 'The way to real salvation can only be found in a dialogue between the religions.' 'God may only be found in a dialogue between religions.' 'The real truth can only be discovered in the communication between religions.' 'Before finding real redemption, religions must enter into dialogue with each other' (p.166). But for the individual learner, insists Astley, the really significant religious dialogue 'is not that between the religions. It is the dialogue between, on the one hand, that individual himself or herself with his or her own worldview; and, on the other hand, the variety of beliefs, values, and spiritual and moral practices of the plural world around them, especially where it takes on a religious form' (p.259).

A further essential dialogue, as Fernando A. Cascante-Gómez emphasises from his reflections on religion in Latin America, is between 'the theology of liberation and the theology of religious pluralism' (p.64). This must include a central critique, the same author points out, of 'the religious intolerance that has characterised and still characterizes the male-dominant versions of Christianity imposed by the European Catholic conquerors and colonisers, and later continued by the Protestant missions from the North' (p.65). The main challenge confronting a pluralist theology of liberation, he admits, is 'the fact that theologies of liberation still have a rather marginal status within current dominant forms of Christianity' (p.71).

The cover of the book depicts four teachers of religion. Respectively, they are a Christian, a Hindu, a Jew and a Muslim. They are all wearing distinctive clothes, marking them out as different from the generality of human beings and inevitably implying they are out-of-touch and out-of-date in relation to the things most people nowadays most care about. All are middle-aged or (in the case of the Christian) elderly. The Hindu is smirking about something, but the others are dour, solemn, fearful, joyless. All – this is not surprising in view of the other stereotypes in the illustration – are male.



It is difficult to imagine that any of these four men would wish to engage in strenuous and self-critical dialogue, or in commitment to a theology of liberation, or even in a discussion about theology and truth. Also, it follows, it is difficult to imagine a more unsuitable, unappealing, unattractive cover for a book entitled Teaching Religion, Teaching Truth.

Fernando A. Cascante-Gómez could be reflecting on the cover when he warns that 'if we, as religious educators are … willing to rethink our Christian faith in light of a pluralist paradigm, then we have to prepare ourselves for censorship, rejection, and even persecution' (p. 76). It is a warning that could help inform

and inspire, and hopefully not in any way deter, deliberations at a further conference, some time soon, of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values.
