

BOOK REVIEW

Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry*. Social Theory, Education, and Cultural Change Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. xxviii + 241 pp. ISBN-10 0-415-95379-0 (pbk), £16.99.

Helen Johnson, ed., *Reflecting on Faith Schools*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. 126 pp. ISBN-10 0-415-40046-5 (hbk), £60.00.

As Helen Johnson notes in her editorial introduction to *Reflecting on Faith Schools*, “Today faith schools attract an immense amount of attention from within and outside the field of education and in many national contexts” (115). The status of government-sponsored faith schooling in western-style democracies is probably as controversial now as it has ever been, with the positions of opponents and supporters increasingly polarized and entrenched. In England, the policy of the Labour Government to expand faith schools, both in terms of the number of such schools and the range of faith communities entering into partnership with the state, continues to receive strong support from both parents and the faith communities themselves. In many respects this policy reflects a general thawing of the pervading liberal polity: freedom of belief is seen to embrace the right of faith communities to educate their children as they deem fit; tolerance is seen to require greater openness to a range of worldviews and belief systems; and, with less dogmatic certainty surrounding questions of the nature and extent of human rationality, the liberal commitment to reason no longer draws the previously instinctual reaction that to educate within the norms of a specific faith tradition is necessarily to indoctrinate. However, this shift from a closed philosophical liberalism to an open liberal polity, with its renewed concern for openness towards the voice of the “Other,” received a significant “wake-up” call in 2001. For many the terrorist attacks on the USA, together with race-related riots in Bradford and other northern English cities, have become icons that illuminate the brute facts of socio-political reality and warn of the urgent need to affirm our common humanity prior to the luxury of any talk of “difference” and “otherness.” Both these books make important contributions to the international controversy surrounding faith schools, albeit in significantly different ways.

The main thesis of Walter Feinberg’s fine study, *For Goodness Sake*, “is that the public has a strong interest in the work of religious schools and that this interest extends beyond the academic performance of their students into the shared moral understandings required to sustain and reproduce liberal, pluralistic democra-

cies" (xi). The argument's immediate background is that of the decision by the US Supreme Court in 2002 to allow public funds to flow directly to faith schools in Ohio (the "Zelma" ruling), thereby breaking the longstanding consensus that, though parents have the right to send their children to faith schools, the state does not have a duty to fund them.

For Goodness Sake is organized in three sections. Part I presents the findings of an extended ethnographic study of Christian (both Catholic and Protestant), Islamic and Jewish schools. Feinberg focuses on issues surrounding the construction of religious identity, the various ways in which teachers mediate tensions between the horizons of meaning of pupils and the "official" stances of faith communities, and the relationship between faith and critical inquiry. Though the depth and insight with which the findings are presented is in many ways remarkable, the failure to identify methodological procedures or offer a systematic overview of the research findings results in a more impressionistic and anecdotal style of reporting than those readers with professional academic concerns might have wished for. Building on the results of this ethnographic survey, Part II offers a critical analysis of the nature of public interest in religious education in faith schools in three key areas. First, "educational safety," understood in terms of the kind of education needed to enable students to live a secure and healthy life. Some readers may not be convinced that the instrumental focus that emerges from the discussion, with its stress on the provision of accurate information about sexual practices and orientations, does full justice to the rich understanding of sexual identity present within many faith communities; on the contrary, some may argue that it serves merely to highlight the flaws of a liberal morality dislocated from any overarching understanding of human flourishing beyond that of a bland pragmatism. Second, issues of intellectual growth and autonomy: the focus here is on the relationship between the standard moral theories offered by faith communities on the one hand, and moral intuition and the possibility of new moral formulations on the other. Third, the relationship between religious chauvinism—identified as one of the tacit goals of faith schools—and the demands of democratic citizenship. Part III offers a pragmatic reconstruction of religious education that brings us to the heart of Feinberg's considered position. His overarching claim is "that while pluralism requires a generous understanding of the work of religious educators [in faith schools], Liberalism requires that a generous reading not be confused with a permissive one" (xxvi). Thus the induction of pupils into the truth embraced by the host community must be supplemented by a plural conception of religious "truths," a process that requires the establishment of an appropriate balance between seeking to promote critical reflective thinking in faith schools and seeking to minimize state intrusion.

Feinberg's argument is worthy of careful study: its sensitivity towards the concerns of the various parties in the debate, in particular towards the challenges facing classroom teachers in faith schools, is laudable; that said, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite his best efforts and clear intentions, his case remains somewhat paternalistic. At the end of the day, the standards of morality and rationality with which Feinberg identifies are drawn from the liberal tradition

and assume something of a normative status. The possibility that the worldviews, moral insights and rational commitments of any given religious tradition might actually trump liberalism, and hence function as a means of challenging, rejuvenating and even replacing the prevailing norms and ideologies of post-Enlightenment western civilization, is conspicuous by its absence.

Reflecting on Faith Schools, edited by Helen Johnson, is altogether more eclectic and fragmented. Reading through it is somewhat akin to spending a rewarding day at a conference, in which most lectures one attends have something to offer, though some inevitably more so than others. Though Johnson makes a sterling attempt to draw links between the various contributions in a series of editorial interventions, the lasting impression is that ultimately the qualities of the various parts do not quite combine to establish a satisfying whole. That said, there is much here worthy of reflection, in particular the discussion of spiritual development in Muslim schools co-authored by Mike Castelli and Abdullah Trevathan, and the stimulating reflections on a comparative study of Jewish and Catholic secondary schools presented by Lynne Scholefield. Roger Marples' trenchant attack on faith schools, which rather swims against the tide of the collection as a whole, suffers somewhat from its failure to address the contested nature of the liberal principles that it assumes to be normative. Caveat Emptor: *Reflecting on Faith Schools* is a verbatim reprint of a special edition of the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (10.2, 2005), and as such may already be present in many personal and institutional libraries.

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