

Whose Religion? Education about Religion in Public Schools

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Workshop Report by Jessica Ford and Leo Van Arragon

“Whose Religion? Education about Religion in Public Schools” was a workshop funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada organized under the Religion and Diversity Project, directed by Lori Beaman, Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in Canada. The workshop drew together scholars from Australia, Canada (Ontario, Québec) India, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States for a multidisciplinary examination of the role of religion in public education in a variety of jurisdictions.

The workshop was organized in six sessions each addressing an aspect of a large, complex and interesting topic. The first of these, “Religion, Education and Citizenship”, featured papers by Anna Halafoff, Deakin University (Australia), Catherine Byrne, Independent Researcher (Australia) and Solange Lefebvre, Université de Montréal. Halafoff, in her paper “The Religion in Schools Debate in Victoria”, argued that, although Australia is constitutionally secular and is, due to immigration, increasingly religiously and socially diverse, the school system in Victoria continues to be dominated by the Christian majority that founded it in the 19th Century. Despite various court cases, constitutional challenges, political advocacy and successive models conceptualizing the role of religion in education in somewhat different ways, there is a growing gap between an increasingly diverse civil society and the state power which entrenches a Protestant Christian hegemony in the school system. Halafoff suggested some positive developments in state and national policies but their longer term effects are still unclear.

Byrne’s paper, entitled, “Religion, the Elephant in the Asia-focused Australian School Room”, suggested that, although there has been an increasing recognition of the need for an “Asia focus” in Australian state schools, religion has not been part of that trend in any significant way. Schools which attempt to address religious diversity tend to do so with some form of religious tourism such as the sharing of food and special events featuring clothing unique to the countries and cultures represented in classrooms. Byrne argued that the national curriculum, which reflects the political dominance of Protestant Christians, ignores the education research on the growing religious diversity in Australian classrooms.

Lefebvre, in her paper “Religious Education in Québec: Neutrality and Spirituality”, demonstrated Québec’s attempt, after the public policy change in 2000 which secularized the school system, to introduce a language of spirituality and meaning into the educational program. She argued there is compelling evidence to suggest that there are significant gaps between the programs, conceptualized as religiously neutral, and their actual delivery. The significant resistance to the change in Québec policy, critical questions over definitions of the secular, spirituality and the framing of meaning and confusion over the role of the professional staff

mandated to deliver the program suggests that the claims of religious neutrality by the Québec government are debatable.

The workshop featured a public lecture delivered by Adam Dinham, Goldsmiths University of London, entitled “Public Religion in an Age of Ambivalence: Recovering Religious Literacy After a Century of Secularism”. He argued that the shift in the public role of religion and religious institutions, particularly in the delivery of welfare and a secularizing education have left us with a “lamentable level of conversation” about religion. He traced a three stage history in which responsibility for social responsibility for social welfare shifted from religious organizations to the state; “willing transfer” conceptualized and encouraged by religious leaders motivated by what they saw as gaps in the delivery of services and for whom the churches and the state were partners in public affairs; “invisible presence” after World War II when the public profile of religion declined in contrast with the growth in the perceived role of the state as the primary deliverer of the public good; “anxious revisibility” since the 1980’s with the re-emergence of religious organizations as public partners in the delivery of social welfare. Dinham argued that the highly visible state and the language of secularism masked the fact that religious organizations have played an important public role throughout; however, the re-emergence of religious organizations as public actors in an environment where the language of religion has been largely lost is the source of public anxiety, resulting in the “lamentable level of conversation” identified by Dinham. He then described his project of re-introducing a language around religion, no longer dominated by Christianity but which takes religion seriously, not in the first place as a public problem but as a public partner.

Session two of the workshop, “Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Examination of ‘Education about Religion’”, included papers by Donald Boisvert (Concordia University), Sonia Sikka (University of Ottawa) and Geir Skeie (Stockholm University). Boisvert’s paper, “Whose Approach to the Study of Religion? The Academic Origins of Québec’s ERC Curriculum”, drew on the language of Paul Donovan, principal of Loyola High School in Montréal to examine the ideological framework of Québec’s “Ethics and Religious Culture” program. Reviewing the history of the ERC program he argued that the ERC has its own religious biases and prejudices masked by the language of secularism and religious neutrality. The resistance to the program by Loyola High School, among others, is not the dying gasp of religious vitality but a re-affirmation of local religion challenging the homogenization of religion by the coercive power of the state. He asked if it is the role of religion to produce “good citizens” as defined by the state and if religious studies scholars have been complicit, if advertently, in a state project which is inherently hostile to religious diversity.

Sikka, in her paper, “What is Indian ‘Religion?’”, examined the theoretical debates over the definition of religion in the Indian context. While she challenged the reductive definitions of scholars such as Timothy Fitzgerald and Russell McCutcheon, she also suggested that the category of religion, as defined in Western intellectual tradition, does not work very well to capture classical Indian traditions. The term religion has too often been used to promote social

harmony by foregrounding religion as “belief”, thereby doing violence to the rich diversity encountered by Europeans in India.

Skeie, drew on Norway as a case study to illustrate a wider theoretical question captured in the title of his paper, “What Does Conceptualization of Religion Have to do with Religion in Education?” He traced a number of trends, including the growing interest in religion, a growing separation of church and state and the decline of the influence of Christianity creating the perceived need to deliver religious education in a religiously neutral or impartial manner. One of the challenges identified by Skeie is that gap between the theoretical investigation at the university level and the actual delivery of religious education on the school level, hence the title of his paper. Religious education, however defined, continues to be more challenging than other school subjects, having generated controversies at local, national and international levels leading to Skeie’s suggestion that theoretical reflection about religion in education must occur on the school level where it is being delivered.

Session three, “Resistance and Counter Narratives” featured presentations by Leo Van Arragon (University of Ottawa) and Damon Mayrl (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid). In his paper, “Religion and Education in Ontario Public Education: Contested Borders and Uneasy Truces”, Van Arragon examined the epistemological assumptions in the phrase “education about religion” introduced into Ontario public education in 1990 to replace “religious instruction” rejected as coercive indoctrination. He asked four critical questions about the supposed religious and epistemological neutrality of both “education about religion” and critical thought as interpreted in law and the regulation of religion in public education. He argued that “education about religion” has its own biases and, like the religious instruction it replaced in 1990, is part of a wider state strategy to deliver good citizenship and social harmony with its own coercive and indoctrinational impulses.

Mayrl compared and contrasted Jewish resistance and adaptation to religious education programs in Australia and the United States in his paper, “Minority Faiths and Religious Education Policy: The Case of Australian and American Jews, 1945-1980”. He demonstrated the unique trajectories of the communities shaped by the constitutional and regulatory frameworks of the two countries, size of the two communities and their divergent histories of immigration, the institutional and cultural resources available to them, and their internal politics. His conclusions that; religious minorities recognize their need to address majoritarian pressures but that the shape of their resistance depends on a range of factors and; minority religious faith groups can be important sources of alternative visions and strategies were consistent with his arguments about Jews in Australia and the United States but applied equally well to the wider themes of the workshop.

Session four, “Current Political and Educational Issues” included papers by Pamela Dickey Young (Queen’s University, Kingston), Heather Shipley (University of Ottawa) and Lori Beaman (University of Ottawa). In her paper, entitled “Sex and Religion in Canadian Schools”, Young focused on the reaction in the Roman Catholic hierarchy to Ontario’s “Accepting Schools Act” which had identified gender and sexual orientation as an important social marker attracting

bullying, and identifying Gay-Straight Alliances as one remedy to be implemented in all government funded schools if such was requested by students. Given the difference in reaction between the bishops and students in Roman Catholic schools, Young asked, “Who are the religious voices which are given space in public debates?” or, “Who speaks for religious communities?” Young challenged the assumption that young people are non-religious, her research and that of Andrew Yip in the UK demonstrating otherwise. She went on to explain a current research project which she is directing called “Religion, Youth and Sexuality”, the theoretical basis of which is queer and feminist theory and which is designed to gather data on youth sexual practices, critically interrogating essentialisms, power and hetero-normativity.

Shipley’s paper, entitled “The Spaces in Between: Religious and Sexual Intersection in Education”, reviewed a number of controversies between 2010 and 2012 which demonstrated the dynamic intersection of religion and sexuality in Ontario public schools. Her particular interest was in the creation and contestation of public space for religion and religious voices, using the introduction of a new sex education curriculum in 2010 which, although thoroughly researched and tested over a two year period and accepted by both the Ministry of Education and the government of Ontario, was quickly withdrawn after a strong public reaction. Shipley asked critical questions about the construction and representation of good and bad sexual and religious citizenship, which voices emerge to shape those constructions and representations in ways that affect public policy, about the role of media as a public mechanism in teaching about religion and about how safe public space is created and eroded.

Beaman, in her paper “Law’s Entanglements: Resolving Questions of Religion and Education”, asked the question, “Who and which voices are included in the debates over ‘education about religion’?” She drew on six Canadian post-Charter court cases in which public space for religion and religious expression had been contested, demonstrating the ambiguous relationship between religion and law. She observed that, while law positions itself as the neutral, impartial voice above the social fray, in fact examination of legal decisions and the pronouncements by judges suggest that the courts are anything but neutral, being deeply embedded as actors in the society in which they find themselves. They declare themselves on the nature of education and religion and on the roles of parents, the state, teachers, schools and students in delivering a particular kind of educational environment with particular spaces for religion in the context of “Canadian values”.

In Session five Bruce Grelle (California State University), Alison Mawhinney (Bangor University, UK) and Stéphanie Gravel, (Université de Montréal) addressed themes under the title “Religious Literacy and Educational Issues”. Grelle, in his paper “Human Rights Based Religion Education in Public Schools: Theory and Politics”, addressed the challenges inherent in the principles of “secularism” and “neutrality”. While acknowledging that the conceptualization of secularism has often been marked by extremes between, among others, Richard Dawkins on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other, he argued that the ideas of the secular and the project of finding religiously neutral human rights should not be discarded. While in actual practice neutrality is often difficult to achieve, there is a growing consensus that

“education about religion” is essential to the incorporation of religion in public schools. One hopeful development was the Toledo Consensus which, by being the result of pragmatic negotiations, avoided divisive metaphysical assumptions, resting on values generally accepted by the major world views producing an agreement that was just about right for modern, religiously diverse societies.

Mawhinney, in her paper, “Protecting Freedom of Thought in Schools: the Case of Ireland”, set the debates over religious education in Ireland in the wider context of a history of appeals to international bodies by citizens of various member states who felt their human rights had been violated by education policies in their own countries. Reviewing the history of religion in Irish state schools, she demonstrated the shift from an inclusive community based model of schooling to a model of state funded confessional schools established in 1870 which set the stage for future conflicts over the role of religion in education. Her particular interest was the opt out clauses in the current system theoretically designed to protect the religious freedom of students objecting to the religious education offered in their schools. She argued that in actual practice opting out clauses were ineffective and harmful to students for a variety of reasons, including the many informal forms of intimidation and embarrassment experienced by students choosing that option. Mawhinney outlined a number of models of schooling introduced in Ireland in response to concerns expressed by among others, the United Nations Human Rights Commission although these remedies were tentative with as yet unclear results.

Gravel, in her paper “Le Programme Québécois Éthiques et Culture Religieuse: Enseignants et Impartialité”, shared her research demonstrating gaps between the theory and delivery of the ERC programme in Québec schools. While in theory the ERC is a religiously neutral programme in which students are exposed to the knowledge of a variety of religions, her research demonstrated a much more nuanced picture. For example, vague definitions of neutrality and impartiality, inconsistent teacher training and support and guidance for the professional management of questions by students revealed that teachers make professional decisions which reveal their own biases. In addition, students’ questions often lead to consideration of religion in ways that do not fit into the state mandate that religion must be seen as “religious culture”. Gravel concluded that while professional judgement and behaviour are achievable, religious neutrality is impossible, both in theory and in practice. The requirement of neutrality in the ERC masks the religious biases in the programme itself and it puts teachers in an untenable position.

In Session six, “Case Studies”, Asha Mukherjee (Visvabharati University) and Mathew Guest (Durham University) presented their research on case studies in the role of religion in education in India and the UK. Mukherjee’s paper, “Religion as a Separate Area of Study in India”, examined complexities in the study of religion which are unique to India, due to its great religious and ethnic diversity as well as the inherent difficulties in defining the word “religion” itself (*dharma* is the term most often used and this, in itself, is problematic as context often determines the meaning of *dharma*). One of the themes in the Indian context has been the search for a form of secularism which finds the balance between Indian traditions and the demands of

modernity, expressed in theorizing alternative modernities and alternative secularities. This quest is made much more complex due to the many languages in India and significant political, social and religious constraints within which scholars, school administrators and politicians operate. There remain, therefore, significant obstacles to the academic study of religion in India, as a subject of academic investigation outside the context of a the study of specific religions.

Guest, in his paper “Christianity and the University Experience: Student Faith in Contemporary England”, shared results of his research into the impact of the university experience on the faith of Christian university students. His findings nuanced the commonly held idea that universities are vehicles for secularization, going beyond the often over simplified accounts of university experience. His research demonstrated that social factors had a greater impact on students’ faiths than did the academic programs. His research suggested that, among the religious groups, Christianity is the least stable and predictable as an identity category; Christianity is a dynamic and portable resource for students as they navigate the transition into adulthood, and that the student experience is shaped by their institutional and cultural capital. His research also revealed that the strongly evangelical forms of Christianity on campuses are a problem for most Christian students who want to distance themselves from the more visible expressions of Christian faith, identifying more clearly with the widely held social values associated with tolerance of and respect for religious differences.

The “Whose Religion? Education about Religion in Public Schools” workshop was a space for scholars to discuss the very important issue of religion and education and as such a lively and interesting dialogue began. In the course of this conversation several themes and questions emerged as central to the discussion at hand. The question of definitions was raised: what is “secularity” and who gets to define it? What is included as a “religion”? The link between citizenship and religious education was a theme that emerged again and again during the discussion, particularly the use of religious education to create a secular citizen and/or one who is better able to navigate difference. This seems to be a place where further exploration is warranted. Another theme that emerged was safety and danger: in what sense is religion “dangerous”? How is religion viewed as a danger to society? How do we proceed to make it safe? And for whom? How does this understanding of religion (as a dangerous subject) affect the content of various religious education programs? A further topic that emerged was that of containment and normalization: whose religion needs to be “contained” and why? The subject of religious based bullying was broached, raising the important issue of the perspective of the children who are taking religious education and the effects that these programs may have on them. Other important and central questions that were raised were how do we teach religious education? Why has religious education suddenly become such a hot topic at this point in time? The workshop papers and discussions demonstrated the benefits of sharing a wide range of theoretical, disciplinary and global perspectives on a topic which has emerged as an important one for educators, academics and regulators around the world.