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R. Murray Thomas. *Religion in Schools: Controversies around the World.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. vii + 234 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-99061-9.

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The Multifaceted Question about the Place and Role of Religion in an Educational Setting

Schools are not merely educational institutions; they are political battlegrounds. They perform an actual and a symbolic task in religious and non-religious strives to gain terrain, or retain it, on a larger national and international political arena. This is an impression one is left with having read R. Murray Thomas's book *Religion in Schools: Controversies around the World.* One of the author's outspoken intentions is also to show how particular conflicts about the place of religion in public and private schools relate to wider patterns of past and present societal concerns and tensions.

The author conducts a descriptive analysis of the relationship religion/school, the focus of which is fourfold. One aim is to make out which types of conflicts there are about religion in schools. A further aim is to identify similarities and differences between these conflicts, as well as to inquire into why this is the case. In order to understand why a particular form of conflict arises, the author proposes an interpretative framework. He is here guided by the hypotheses that "*[t]raditions and critical events from the past have contributed to the present status of a belief constituency and thereby affect that constituency's exercise of power during confrontations over religion in schools*" (p. 15).[1] The author later shows this with his study of the different position of the Roman Catholic church holds in present day France, Italy and Spain despite its traditionally dominant position.

Accordingly, it is beneficial to concentrate on the following four issues when studying a conflict. "[U]nderstanding the religion/school relationship in the 12 cases of controversy can be fostered by analyzing those relationships from a vantage point focusing on: 1. the nature of belief constituencies, 2. the influence of cultural tradition, 3. events that significantly threatens and/or changes tradition, and 4. the exercise of power by the main belief constituencies engaged in confrontations over religion in schools" (p. 15). Lastly, the author also inquires into the ways in which one has sought to resolve the conflicts and how well one has seemingly succeeded in this task.

As a result, each of the chapters dedicated to a country survey address these issues. There is an elaboration of the facts of a particular controversy related to the relationship religion/school, and of the way in which it is finally resolved. An overview is given of the historical religious, social and political developments of the country leading up to the controversy. The different parties to the conflict and their ideological attachments are presented, and there is an assessment of the level of their authority and power.

Central and Latin America, as well as the African continent and countries in the east and most northern part of Europe have no representatives among the twelve countries studied: Australia, China, England, France, India, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Thailand, and the United States. Still, the perspective is broad as it is. It covers many of the world's religious and non-religious beliefs, and comprises topics such as the display of religious symbols in public schools, compulsory religious instruction, the place of religion in the teaching of other subjects (like biology), obligatory participation in religious activities in schools, and state supervision of private school curricula etc. The survey clearly shows the variety of issues that come to the fore when focus is put on religion in an educational setting.

Despite the vast and diverse area that is covered, the book has a clear, logical outline that helps to keep the threads together. Three chapters that introduce the theme and elaborate the interpretative framework with which the controversies will be approached precede the chapters dedicated to country surveys. Similarly, the book concludes with a chapter that rounds up the discussion of the country surveys and proposes answers to initial research questions. In addition, there is a deliberative attempt to write in a clear and easy read style. The author has the general public in mind as the poten-

tial readers and goes to great lengths to explain central terms and concepts to the uninitiated.

A question is, of course, what kind of previous knowledge one can expect from future readers. For example, to attempt to give a comprised overview of all world religions and other belief systems on less than six pages is ambitious. It illustrates the pedagogical concerns of the author. However, such concise explanations may also lead the reader astray at times, being, as they are, schematic. Moreover, if such overviews had been accompanied by more references, which sometimes are lacking or amount to a single Internet source, it would have provided the interested reader with suggestions as to where further information can be found.

Still, despite the outspoken goal to keep chapters short in order to increase the easiness of the reading, there are perspectives that could have been elaborated in more detail to enhance the understanding of the issues at hand. The author does not claim to have exhausted the analytical tools with the help of which the empirical material can be approached. Nevertheless, a more extensive elaboration on, e.g., the topic of secularization could have been useful and clarifying. This issue is approached in a somewhat one-dimensional manner. Statistical data showing a noticeable decline in participation in traditional religious activities, like Sunday services, among European populations is taken as evidence for a fading religiosity.

In the author's analysis, such a stand is then linked to a display of certain skepticism towards Holy Scriptures as sources of knowledge. In sociological studies, this is often identified as the feature of "rationalization" entailed in secularization; religious explanations of human life increasingly give way for scientific ones. However, theorists also critically point out that the trend is not always clear, as people may actually reconcile religious and rational-scientific discourses.[2] In certain country surveys, like India and France, the author furthermore identifies secularism as an imperative characterization of the state, from which specific understandings as regards the relationship religion/school can be deduced.

However, various current studies in sociology of religion tell a more differentiated story. They show that European countries are experiencing profound changes in their religious landscapes. While the Western societies have lived through a phase of secularization, value fragmentation and individualization, it is asserted that one is also experiencing what has been termed a re-sacralization or re-enchantment where "the religious" takes on new forms. In addition, the steady immigration from other parts of the world vitalizes the landscape.[3] Thus, a decline in attendance in traditional forms of worship, or the turning to established religious denominations only for the rites of passage, does not rule out religiosity as a phenomenon of the past with little influence of the ways of life of present day people. Yet, what one finds, is that the traditional religious language is at times considered obsolete; people do not feel at home articulating themselves in it for various reasons.

Bearing in mind that secularism is a multivocal concept, it is thus useful to identify different aspects of the phenomenon when one tries to find out in which ways we are witnessing secularization (and re-sacralization), and what will be its anticipated consequences for the religion/school relationship. A distinction can e.g. be made between a societal differentiation where religion comes to occupy a specific space alongside economics, politics etc., a marginalization entailing a loss of influence and authority of institutionalized religion, and a decline of religious beliefs and practices–or at least a privatization of religion.[4] What is more, these different trends do not necessarily occur simultaneously, nor rely on each other. While the influence on part of institutionalized religion in the public sphere and its school buildings may have diminished, the same may in more or less organized form continue to prosper in the personal lives of its followers (as the author's study of China shows), and vice versa.

Clearly, there will be diverse answers to questions related to the relationship religion/school, depending on what the religious, social and political reality looks like in the above-mentioned respects. At least, one can imagine that the place of religion in schools, and e.g. the preferable type of religious instruction, is viewed differently on part of religious institutions with a clearly authoritative place in society, than on part of individuals who display religious attachments but live in a society with a variety of religious and other traditions. If the country surveys at some point had been jointly mirrored against a set of distinctions, this would have drawn together the author's comments on the issue of secularization. It would have visualized the multifaceted ness of what in current research and public debates is summarized under the headings of secularism and secularization.

Besides the core facts about different actual world religions and non-religious belief systems, provided in chapter 2, some additional general elaboration on different elements and functions of a religious or other lifeview, and its relation to life as a whole would furthermore have been appreciated. Such elements are mentioned, but not elaborated in any detail. A person surely comes to in-

tegrate a variety of aspects in her/his personality as s/he is socialized into today's societies. While a religious narrative may play a central part in this socialization, the individual history with its experiences will still influence the understanding of the collectively sustained life patterns. In addition, as the author points out, the multiple sources of information increasingly available to people (while not to everyone) in a densely interconnected world offer previously unheard of possibilities for acquiring new perspectives and insights.

As a result, one has to recognize e.g. the varied roles sacred texts can and do play in the lives of present-day believers, not the least since established religious institutions in many places have lost some of their previous authority. Their relationship to the population varies. People may be simultaneously religious and secular (depending, of course, on what one means with these terms). As the author also shows, religious believers can be among those who defend the school as a secular space, as well as among those who want to challenge this understanding by increasing the influence of religion over that sphere. The survey of India e.g. depicts popular resistance against reinforced influence of the major religious tradition in the ambit of school instruction. Representatives of all faiths criticized the measures taken.

The role of religious sources is also a topic that the author continuously returns to in his discussion of what amounts to "knowledge" about the world, and where the perspectives of empirical science and of religion quite obviously do not entirely coincide. Yet, in what sense does religious articulations address human life? What are their sense and meaning? Believers answer these questions differently. Yet, this does not mean that some of them would necessarily be less *sincere* in their attachment to their faith and its textual sources. This issue was raised above with reference to sociological studies that critically explore rationalization as a feature of societal secularization.

The question of the ontological and epistemological status of religious utterances is, of course, a much-debated issue within the field of philosophy of religion.[5] However, even a shorter remark summarizing different positions could have deepened the understanding of the author's categorizations of believers into (depending on the particular case) traditionalists, conservative, fundamentalist, and liberal ones. It would have additionally clarified the diverse commitments to both national law and international law, a religious belief with its sources, so-called democratic values etc. that the author points out as decisive when these groups of believers position themselves in decisions concerning education and what place religion should play e.g. in the instruction in natural sciences. The last is the issue at stake in the controversies looked at in the surveys of the United States and Australia.

Such an elaboration as the one mentioned, would also have contributed to the understanding of the information that the author appreciatively provides at the end of the book. There he maps out the different sources that actors come to draw on when they position themselves in the particular conflicts about the place and role of religion in schools. While that overview asserts that national and international law, as well as empirical scientific data generally form cornerstones for a position opposite to one based on religious doctrine or tradition, the author simultaneously argues that different perspectives/sources can fuse for those engaged in a controversy. For example, in the Thai controversy over private Islamic schools, so-called *pondoks*, defenders of these religious schools sought comfort in both religious doctrine and an international legal discourse promoting religious rights.

The remark about a fusion of perspectives is an important point pushed by the author, and it underlines the meaningfulness of the conflict perspective chosen. Looking at concrete conflicts, the entangled ness of perspectives becomes apparent in a way that an abstract analysis of the relationship religion/school may fail to recognize. Solutions worked out *a priori* in the abstract may thus in reality fall short of their goal. In line with this, the author also concludes that one cannot discern definite trends of conflict resolution. Still, in general, conflicts are at least temporarily resolved. If not, there is a stalemate.

Based on the country surveys conducted, the author further identifies four general trends of conceiving of the relationship between religion and schools. He labels them "secular, religious, alternating and unchanging" (p. 199). The trends reveal different emphasizes as regards the direct involvement of religion: decreasing or increasing involvement, periodically shifting policies or stable ones. Hence, a conclusion that can be drawn having read the book, is that what it comes down to in the end when religion is on the educational agenda is a choice between different possible models for making room for religion in schools, or more generally resolving a conflict. One model is chosen over another for some reasons and for some purposes. We are dealing with policy decisions. As the author shows, belief constituencies may here play a role to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their authoritative position in the concrete society, as well as their present worldwide influence–as the cases of Pak-

istan and Thailand show.

The book makes a strong case for the argument that a sensible analysis of controversies over the place of religion in schools should show awareness for the background against which a decision to adopt certain measures is intelligible and for which it is an expression. This, of course, does not do away with the need to evaluate possible fallacies of the way chosen for resolving a conflict, or the original order that gave rise to the conflict in the first place. The author concludes that critical events often trigger such a need to reassess earlier positions. As already noted, he also always points out the different positions represented in the analyzed controversies. The adopted measures are not uncritically accepted, and negotiations are at time carried out on quite unequal terms.

Likewise, history tells us that the controversies are seldom permanently resolved. Instead, the potential conflict religion/school lingers under the surface more or less enduringly. According to the author, this is particularly the case in societies where no belief constituency holds a clearly dominant position. Overall, a hypothesis is that conflicts arise in societies with more than one religious or non-religious belief constituency, for the reason that there will then exist several distinct ways of envisaging the values and ideas that should inform the school reality. Lastly, the author stipulates that controversies concerning the relationship religion/school will increase in Europe and North America, while non-religious parties to such controversies in other societies than these will most likely loose in influence.

Irrespective of the different issues that are addressed in the book, and others that could have been added to the discussed ones, the fact that the presence of religion in schools is a recurrent issue on the agenda around the world shows that it is not a matter to be taken lightly. Rather, it strongly engages people. The book *Religion in Schools: Controversies around the World* offers an informative exposé of this ongoing and intense discussion.

Notes

[1]. With a belief constituency, the author understands "a collection of people who subscribe to the same cluster of convictions" (p. 15).

[2]. See e.g. David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 29-59, at 40-42.

[3]. See e.g. Richard K. Fenn, "Editorial Commentary: Religion and the Secular; the Sacred and the Profane: The Scope of the Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Malden et al.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 3-22; Paul Heelas, "Introduction: On Differentiation and Dedifferentiation," in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 1-18; Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Malden et al.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 161-175.

[4]. Distinctions are made in several different ways in order to identify what is entailed in that which is named secularization. See e.g. Richard K. Fenn, "Editorial Commentary: Religion and the Secular; the Sacred and the Profane: The Scope of the Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Malden et al.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 3-22, at 3-5; David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 29-59; and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[5]. See e.g. Eberhard Herrmann, *Scientific Theory and Religious Belief: An Essay on the Rationality of Views of Life* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995); Ulf Zackariasson, *Forces by Which We Live: Religion and Religious Experience from the Perspective of a Pragmatic Philosophical Anthropology* (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell International, 2002).

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