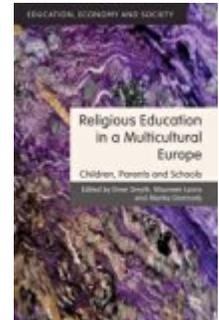


**Emer Smyth, Maureen Lyons, Merike Darmody, eds..** *Religious Education in a Multicultural Europe: Children, Parents and Schools*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. x + 215 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-137-28149-4.



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While much research shows that primary religious socialization is a family matter, Emer Smyth, Merike Darmody, and Maureen Lyons argue that because children spend much of their time in school, schools also shape how religious identities are acquired. It is thus important to explore the role schools play in the transmission of religious and secular belief and values. The aim of this book is to shed new light on children's perspectives on religion and schooling. The focus is on primary schoolchildren because, according to the authors, younger children's voices are often absent from studies of religious transmission and education.

The anthology draws on material from an ambitious comparative study entitled Religious Education in a Multicultural Europe (REMC), carried out between 2008 and 2010 by researchers in five different European countries. Focusing on religious identity formation among primary school children, the project is grounded in several explicit assumptions. First, schools play a role in belief and value transmission and formation, and this

has implications for social cohesion. Second, the role schools play varies, with educational systems shaped by particular historical conflicts and accommodations between church and state; by parental school selection; and by prevailing positions on the place of religion in schools, approaches to religious instruction, and support for faith schools. Third, there is a mismatch between the present position of religion in educational institutions and the shifting religious demography and religiosity of European populations.

The book's eight chapters comprise an introduction and conclusion, an overview of religion in the European context, and five chapters presenting qualitative case studies carried out in Ireland, the United Kingdom (Scotland), Belgium (Flanders), Germany, and Malta. Looking across Europe, chapter 2 presents a broad quantitative overview of patterns and trends in religiosity drawn from the European Values Study (1999-2000). It also presents the varying structures of national educational systems, and factors that affect school selection processes. Finally, it

discusses intersections between these three areas. The overview highlights differences and similarities between the five case-study countries—for example, the counterintuitive finding that that countries with low religiosity (Germany, Flanders/Belgium) both subsidize faith schools and award them much autonomy, whereas a country with high religiosity (Malta), while favoring faith schools, does not award much autonomy.

The following five chapters (3-7) present a brief historical overview of the educational system and institutional context in the countries studied. They present the methodology, analytical frameworks, empirical findings, and to some extent the theoretical underpinnings of their studies. Although all case studies rely on interviews with headmasters, teachers, parents, children, and other key stakeholders, researchers also employ a broad array of methods. Some studies (chapters 4 and 6) are more explicitly theoretical than others, and some address mainstream populations (chapters 3- 5), while other focus more specifically on Muslims and immigrants (chapters 6 and 7). Although the book explicitly aims to shed light on “children’s perspectives,” these perspectives are given different prominence and framing in the different chapters. Chapter 4 analyzes “children’s perspectives” through a focus on the semiotics of everyday religious materiality and visual display, whereas chapter 6 uses a theory of acculturation attitudes to frame how Muslim children negotiate being “good Muslims” across domains of home and school. Chapter 7 probes patterns of self-definitions of religious identity across generations, in both single- and mixed-faith families. The individual chapters are informative and empirically interesting, yet often more suggestive than persuasive in their argument. Noting the scope of the case studies—often including up to five schools—and reading the chapters packed with school descriptions, data tables, and interview excerpts, one senses that the authors are struggling to incorporate a book’s worth of angles, discussions, and material into one small chapter. We get

an overview of the different countries, and a range of different approaches to “children’s perspectives,” but also a sense that there is much more material and much more to say about a specific approach. Thus, given more space, the individual chapters might prove more convincing.

The comparative thrust of the larger project was to choose countries differing in key aspects of their institutional context: constitutional/legal position of church in relation to state; religious composition of the population; kinds of elementary school and degree of choice open to families; prevalence of faith schools; provision and content of religious education. In the introduction, Smyth, Darmody, and Lyons claim that “[a]nalyzing these differences between the five study countries [and, I might add, five different schools in each country] will ... provide invaluable insights into the way structures shapes children’s religious development” (p. 3). They are well aware of the challenges qualitative studies present with regard to their broad comparative ambitions, in that the chosen sites present an array of structural differences and the fact that qualitative studies must be kept explorative and flexible to capture the “voices” of parents and students (p. 7). Yet they do not discuss why the differences between this particular selection of countries is relevant to the broader research question, nor do they make much note of how different methodologies and theoretical approaches affect the intended comparative analysis of the ways in which children’s religious development is shaped through schooling in the case-study countries. The actual differences in the case studies presented might have been probed to reflect on how local academic interests and national political research priorities cast trajectories that may disjoin or trump the grander comparative ambitions of large EU-funded research collaborations.

The project (REMC) is conceptualized around the question of how (a child’s) religious identity is formed. Smyth, Darmody, and Lyons argue that,

contrary to other studies of religion formation that frame children either as passive (inborn?) recipients of parental and family religiosity or as universal creatures with innate cognitive development projects, this study conceptualizes children as active social agents who develop personalized senses of religion within the limits, constraints, and opportunities afforded by families, schools, educational systems, and policies. In this, the work implicitly addresses political questions of children's rights, pedagogical questions of constructive ways of dealing with religious diversity in educational settings (chapter 7), and basic research questions about factors that determine how human beings appropriate particular beliefs, values, and worldviews throughout their life course.

In their conclusion, the authors make two claims: that the book focuses on the formation of religious identity among young children in relation to different educational systems, and that the book has explored children's perspectives on religion and schooling across European societies. The book is most successful in providing a suggestive overview of child-centered approaches to the question of religious identification in relation to different schools and educational systems. It is not, nor was it meant as, a thorough investigation of how "children's perspectives" on religion and education may be elicited through an array of methods; neither does it address the question of what "children's perspectives" contribute to our present thinking about processes of "religious formation" in and across private and public spheres. Finally, the authors do not present any argument as to why the notion of identity appears so central to the question of a child's religiosity.

Despite the many intriguing excerpts from interviews with children that figure most prominently in chapters 5, 6 and 7, I am not entirely convinced that book's overall treatment of children's perspectives, most often presented through brief interview excerpts, bring us further in un-

derstanding ongoing and dynamic processes of religious identity formation or how we might make sense of a single child's or a group of schoolchildren's religiosity. In this, the work lacks an overarching discussion of what might be considered a "child's perspective" and how exactly such a perspective sheds light on the focus question of religious identity formation among young children. The work also lacks a methodological discussion of how a child's "own" perspective, for example on religious identity formation, can be extracted using a mixed bag of qualitative interviews, questionnaires, essays, document analysis, family case studies, material observations, and school descriptions. Finally, the authors do not probe their assumptions regarding the nature of a child's (or anyone's) "ownness" or the notions of personhood that underwrite ideas of personal ownership and authorship of individually unique opinions, choices, and negotiations.

This book is very informative, if not coherent throughout. The ambitious scope of the original project, the different approaches of the case studies, the enormity of the questions asked, and the lack of space for presentation, reflection, and argument, all contribute to the sense of unfinished work. This said, it is, on the whole, an excellent place to look for new questions. For as the authors rightly emphasize, something is happening: the religious make-up of European populations is changing, and changing much more rapidly than the historically founded and culturally inert educational systems. Given this, how should educators perceive religious diversity, and the predominant, often "invisible" Christian culture and consensus of many public schools? What should a national public or private faith school's response be to growing religious diversity and to children's needs for knowledge about their "own" and "other" religions and the relations between them? This book shows we are in the midst of a new round of resettling classic tensions between church and state, parents and school, public commonalities and religious groupings; yet, as the au-

thors suggest, this time around, we must not, and cannot, bypass children as interlocutors in the settling of these questions.

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