Book Review


The point of departure for each of the essays in this volume is the Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education which was established in 2007 in the City of Birmingham, UK. The fundamental question that these contributions treat though is less about religion, and more about the purpose of education. The volume operates around the view that ‘education should have the teaching of virtue and the development of character at its core’ (p. 1), and progresses by elaborating the contribution that religious education (RE) makes to the teaching of virtue and the development of character. As Felderhof says:

If education is about the ‘spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils…and of society’ (the British 1996, Education Act), then a religious education that is explicitly guided by moral and spiritual ends will be at the heart of the education enterprise. A religious education that loses sight of these ends will risk becoming a minority interest. (p. 20)

The contributions are organised into four categories. Part One treats some theoretical issues dealing with how and why RE should be taken up—and to this end it both justifies understanding education as moral development, and explains the way in which RE can contribute to this moral development. In Chapter 1, Felderhof sets the task of RE as follows:

one needs to provide the young with more than information and descriptions of the so-called facts ‘about religions’; one needs to move from a retrospective to a prospective RE. A properly prospective religious education has at its core a vision of the future, of what kind of persons the young are to become, together with a vision of society in which justice, compassion and mercy prevails. (p. 27)

In Chapter 2, Brenda Watson challenges the notion that society is simply divided into knowledge versus opinion or belief. She advocates treating knowledge as a mystery both in that it is ‘a problem to be solved’ and that it ‘necessarily lies beyond our cognitive and interpretative powers’ (p. 36). And to this end, successful RE should seek to combat absolutism and dogmatism.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe two aspects to the background of education for moral acquisition. David Carr surveys the establishment of, and modern return to, an Aristotelian notion of virtue-ethics, which provides a background to the claim that education should serve the formation of persons. L. Philip Barnes traces the development of RE in Britain, showing how it moved away from a confessional education to a more secular view of RE which operated under the assumption that morality was an autonomous area of study and should be pursued separately from religious education. He then details the reaction against this conception in Birmingham, which gave rise to the Agreed Syllabus for RE.
Part Two is a characterisation of various dispositions or virtues which can be transmitted to students through RE. In my view, this is the least successful part of the book. These descriptions appear with no introduction, and so it is difficult to determine exactly what purpose they are intended to serve. The introduction to the volume does not mention the rationale for the inclusion of these chapters, but only tries to anticipate and (unsuccessfully) dissipate criticism of the limited selection of dispositions and the Christian focus of their description. Further, the chapters are interspersed with reflective questions, which makes it very difficult to determine the intended audience for these chapters.

The following dispositions are discussed: being honest, being compassionate, being just, being courageous, being hopeful, being temperate, being wise, and being faithful. Many of these descriptions read like a spiritual reflection or sermon on the selected topic, and there is little discussion of the ways in which RE contributes to the training in these dispositions—which is rather surprising given the title and direction of the volume. The exception is William K. Kay’s discussion of justice in Chapter 7, which considers conceptions of justice in several religious traditions and provides a few suggestions for using religious texts and stories in the classroom to communicate ideas of justice, thereby justifying the claim that RE can be useful for education in virtue.

Part Three provides a set of lesson plan examples, illustrating the way in which RE can be marshalled to teach the aforementioned dispositions to students at various stages in their educational process. My experience is in university education, so I cannot assess the expected effectiveness of many of the lessons which are geared towards younger students. But, the overall point holds: religion can be useful for moral education starting at rather a young age and these prospective lessons do a good job of showing how such education could progress.

Finally, Part Four is a very brief preliminary analysis of a pilot study measuring the effectiveness of the Birmingham RE program. The initial results show that there is some effectiveness in the disposition-centred instructional pattern which the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus has established, though the study did not attempt to measure students’ perception of their gains in these 24 dispositions. The results of the full study will be well worth considering.

Taken as a whole, this volume sets out to show that RE can aid in the formation of virtue in individual students. Theoretically this is an interesting proposal, and one worth considering in more depth. The four chapters that make up Part One do a good job of making a case that RE can play a role in the task of education of the whole person. Felderhof’s observation that academic teaching of religion tends towards the retrospective, whereas faith is always prospective outside of the academy, is interesting. Many students receiving RE understand religion to be a present reality with implications for the future and their future, and this should influence the way that religion is taught. However, there are many practical difficulties resulting from shifting the burden of instruction from teaching about religion, to encouraging students to make personal gains from their RE instruction. These difficulties need to be worked out in more detail. In the end, Teaching Virtue proves that for RE to be a justifiable educational endeavour it must provide students with more than a set of retrospective facts about various religious systems, but more thought is needed with regard to the practical matters that attend the change in focus towards moral education.

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