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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Addressing religion and human rights

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This first volume in the Springer series 'Religion and Human Rights' is a loosely connected collection of articles dealing with various empirical studies of education and religion, or religious education, and human rights. It is edited by Hans-Georg Ziebertz and Anders Sjöborg. Ziebertz is a Catholic theologian and Professor of Religious Education at the Catholic Theological faculty of the University of Würzburg, Germany. Sjöborg is Professor of Sociology of Religion and dean of the theological faculty at Uppsala University. Both have an interest in young people, religion and religious education. They are connected through the international research project on Religion and Human Rights, coordinated by Ziebertz. Three of this volume's contributions draw upon data from this research project. We are promised a collection of essays dedicated to the 'interconnectedness between religion, education and human rights from an international perspective using an interdisciplinary approach.' This description is true, in so far as the book includes several case studies from various countries (hence international) written by political scientists, legal scholars, teacher educators, sociologists and theologians/professors of religious education (hence interdisciplinary). The volume is not, however, unified by one approach, or centered on one specific theme or issue. Its themes and contents vary: from religious education in schools, via human rights in education, to young people's attitudes towards human rights, and, finally, to human rights education/teaching human rights. Methods and theoretical frameworks vary from chapter to chapter. After an introductory chapter written by the editors, the first three chapters are case studies discussing aspects of religious education in Poland, Belarus and Finland, respectively. Other articles/chapters focus on human rights in education related specifically to issues of religion, religious freedom and religious coercion. These are discussed with examples from Estonia, Norway and Sweden. Two chapters, authored and co-authored by Ziebertz himself, are dedicated to quantitative and comparative studies of young people's attitudes towards human rights, and consequences for human rights education. Finally, the teaching of human rights is discussed in two chapters. Despite the lack of a common perspective, the essays can roughly be described as dealing with, on the one hand, the place (and understanding) of religion in school/education, and, on the other, with human rights education and how it should be conducted.

In the chapters they have authored, Ziebertz and Sjöborg adopt a normative perspective on religious education/human rights education. They take for granted the universality of human rights across cultural and religious divides (p.p. 7; 116-117; 135 and elsewhere). However, they also argue that religious education must focus on developing and teaching human rights principles by drawing on the innate perspectives of the religions themselves. (p 8.)

While most of the other articles and chapters are more broadly concerned with the relation between religion and education in various North and East European contexts and possible human rights perspectives, Paula Gerber's focus, in her contribution, is on human rights education in school curricula, with examples drawn mostly from Australia and New Zealand, with some references to the UK and Ireland. Her essay seems to be something of an addendum.

Also somewhat puzzling is the relationship between the majority of the studies in this volume, and chapters 9 and 10, which Ziebertz authors/co-authors. These chapters are the longest, most detailed ones. They present quantitative data on young people's attitudes and understandings of human rights. In both cases, educational aspects seem to be added as an afterthought in order to fit the format of the book. Chapter 9 is introduced by a discussion on the question of the relation between Islam/Christianity and human rights, followed by a comparative analysis of how young German Christians and Muslims 'structure' human rights. Conclusions are drawn about how the two groups differ in valuing human rights, based on a survey in which students were asked to rate specific statements related to various families of rights. Chapter 10 presents an international comparative study seeking to refute earlier research that identified personality as a decisive influence on attitudes to human rights. Instead, the authors seek to establish geographical location and socio-cultural environment as the major factors influencing these attitudes. In both chapters, conclusions are drawn from the specific study as to what human rights education should be, what it should include, and how it should be taught. In both cases, however, the theme and research questions guiding the data collection have very different focuses. In these two chapters, the use of the empirical data is problematic. The material does not reveal the content and form of human rights education the students might have had access to previously, nor their concrete social and political situations; the students' backgrounds might well guide their understandings of human rights, as formulated in the survey they are asked to respond to.

While single contributions from the volume might find their readers, the significance and usefulness of an anthology of this kind is limited. The focuses of the different contributions of this collection differ significantly, and theoretical discussions are not pursued in any depth. The insider perspective and the normative stance of the editors is evident in the introductory chapter, when they claim that 'A key concept is the dignity of every person, given by the likeness of God, who determined for people to have freedom and to live in charity with his/her neighbour.' (p.8) This insider perspective is neither discussed nor placed in its particular academic context. The book is not presented as being written from a Christian perspective, nor is this context mentioned elsewhere in the volume. This makes the intent, aim and motivation of the publication obscure and difficult to assess.