

Dealing with Discriminatory Dogma in Religious Education

What happens when teaching for religious tolerance meets the intolerant teachings of religion? Professors of education, Dr Bruce Maxwell and Dr Sivane Hirsch from the University of Montreal and the University of Quebec Trois-Rivières, explore the difficulties encountered when discriminatory dogma enters the religious education classroom. Their research carves out a path for faith studies educators to observe the formal and ethical demands of their role while enabling critical engagement with the more controversial elements of religious belief.

Religious education is taught in many school systems across the world. Learning about different faiths may help to promote peaceful coexistence in societies with diverse beliefs. But what about the discriminatory and illiberal content of religions? Engaging with these controversial creeds, found in all major religions – from the homophobic, to the racist, to the misogynistic – raises difficult ethical and cultural questions for teachers of religious education. Dr Bruce Maxwell and Dr Sivane Hirsch, professors of education from the University of Montreal and the University of Quebec Trois-Rivières, examine how teachers can navigate these concerns to provide rigorous yet respectful instruction that expands pupils' religious literacy.

CRUX OF THE MATTER

While there is undoubtedly much to admire in the teachings and practices of religion, some aspects may be criticised, especially from a contemporary point of view. Consider the Old Testament story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. This seemingly innocent parable may carry a misogynistic message. Readers are invited to reflect on Abraham's favouritism toward his legitimate son Isaac over his bastard son Ismael. Meanwhile, behind the story lies a manipulative female figure. It was Abraham's wife, Sarah, who convinced him to rape and impregnate the slave girl Hagar, then out of jealousy encouraged his abandonment of the girl and their son to the desert.

A religious studies teacher faced with the aforementioned passage might see an opportunity to discuss with students a story shared in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faith, and one that prompts serious thought about the negative

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The Old Testament story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar prompts serious thought about negative stereotypes. But how can teachers approach these in class?

stereotypes embedded in scripture. However, the same teacher might feel reluctant to engage in a topic that could cause offence. Indeed, a lesson plan deliberately designed to provoke ethical questioning of religious tradition sits uneasily with the regulatory and normative environment in which faith studies often operates. Profs Maxwell and Hirsch investigate these tensions in the context of Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) curriculum.

The ERC follows a cultural approach to studying faith, which is common to religious education (RE) curricular across the world. This approach is embedded in the ERC's three key aims. The first aim is to promote respect for different cultures by developing pupil understanding of Quebec's social plurality, in particular its religious diversity. The second is to equip young people with the tools to think independently and debate productively on social and ethical issues. Thirdly, the ERC sets out to advance the liberal democratic values of Canadian and Quebecois constitutional law, including freedom from arbitrary discrimination and freedom of conscience and religion. These criteria create a contradiction when RE teachers are faced with the

choice to provide intentional instruction on religious illiberalism. Such an action may uphold the principles of critical thinking and debate, but hinders the intention to safeguard intercultural freedom and respect.

LEFT IN LIMBO

Teachers in Quebec, like teachers elsewhere in the world, often lack explicit guidance on the critical study of religion. At the same time, the ERC curriculum endorses a cultural approach to RE that appears to discourage teachers from broaching the subject. The cultural approach centres on outward expressions of religious conviction rather than doctrinal analysis. As a result, religious traditions are presented through a descriptive framework, which focuses on youth experience and the local setting – including beliefs and rituals surrounding

There is undoubtedly much to admire in the teachings and practices of religion. However, every major faith has a dark side.

birth, death, marriage, and the changing seasons. Furthermore, religions are handled deferentially, steering clear of value judgements and rather fostering 'religious literacy', by which students come to understand the norms and

values behind modern expressions of faith, as seen from the perspective of those who practice faith.

Since the cultural approach to RE curbs critical engagement, some have argued the ERC curriculum sanitises religion and even pushes a pro-religious bias. Accordingly, the programme has been accused of violating state secularism, where the government abstains from preferential treatment for any or all religion. Meanwhile, others defend non-judgemental religious education by contending that such deference is consistent with the nature of religious dialogue, which prioritises mutual recognition through faith over the rational exchange of ethical arguments. From this standpoint, handling religious controversy differently to that of history and the social sciences reflects the unique epistemology of religion, rather than a favouritism towards faith that betrays secular principles.

GAINING PUBLIC FAITH

An important factor in Quebec's religious education is its mandatory status. Like in other societies with compulsory faith studies, this creates political and legal constraints. For example, broadly speaking, the government must ensure that parents, religious groups, and other educational stakeholders are sufficiently confident that public schools will create a welcoming school environment for all children regardless of their ethnic or religious origins. Indeed, an obligation to respect religious preferences is also recognised by international law. Signatory states of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights agree to preserve the liberty of parents and legal guardians to choose the education for their children that is in accordance with their own religious and moral convictions. Thus, mandatory RE is compelled to respect

these rights to religious freedom, or else lose its compulsory status and permit families to opt out of the curriculum. Some countries, like Singapore, have adapted to these social and legal conditions by providing an optional



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RE curriculum that is targeted towards particular faiths in society.

The aforementioned covenant does not mean that the mandatory education plan should necessarily be adapted for children of different faiths, but rather prescribes two conditions for state-mandated religious education. One stipulation is that the curriculum be sufficiently cultural, in that it aims to raise intercultural awareness and respect. Secondly, teachers must keep to pedagogical neutrality in the study of religious history and ethics. These requirements are integral to the so-called Toledo Guiding Principles of Teaching Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools, which advocate the cultural approach to RE in their educational focus and commitment to impartiality. Accordingly, a teacher directly inciting students to mount ethical challenges to a religion would contravene the legal conditions for compulsory faith studies. This means societies with mandated RE, like Quebec, Norway, and Turkey, are steered into the deferential study of religion via legal compulsion, while England, Singapore, some cantons of Switzerland, and other optional RE locations are bound to the cultural paradigm mainly as a political or educational choice.

A GOOD SHEPHERD

A teacher leading a class of students through open criticism of illiberal religious beliefs and practices would breach many of the political, legal, and curricular foundations of RE courses

Navigating all the concerns and still turning critical attention to intolerant faith would involve careful pedagogic manoeuvring from teachers.

across the world, even as this may uphold the independent thought and equal treatment promoted in those same education systems. Since the former concerns hold significant weight, teachers are left discouraged from posing explicit ethical challenges to religion in their lessons. Meanwhile, such a pedagogical approach might also be counterproductive. Evidence



Teachers can cultivate student awareness of tensions between faiths by providing sensitive responses to pupils' challenging questions.

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suggests pupils tend to side with families when the values of home are pitched in contrast with those of the school, and that deep convictions can become more entrenched under criticism from authority.

However, through careful pedagogical maneuvering, teachers may deftly navigate all the concerns above and still turn critical attention to the illiberal and discriminatory aspects of religious faith. One opening lies in the comparative

study of religion. Take a lesson on religious dress, a contentious topic for gender politics. Students could explore theological supports for different types of head coverings – from the kippa, to the turban, to the veil – while recognising the plurality within each religion and the norms of particular cultures, including different headscarf practices for Muslim women around the world. If delivered on

a descriptive, impartial and non-dogmatic basis, such a lesson could allow the teacher to give religious communities a voice to speak for themselves about their ethical concerns about particular religious traditions, which are frequently shared by non-adherents.

Another way teachers can follow their professional code and still cultivate student awareness of tensions between faiths and liberal democracy is by providing sensitive and insightful responses to pupils' challenging questions. For example, pupils may wonder why other parents forbid romantic relationships or visits to certain homes. A teacher could nurture this curiosity and remain consistent with the cultural approach to RE by detailing facts about the diverse ethical stances held within religious communities. Meanwhile, as long as it remains objective, teachers can point out when parents' religious or cultural attitudes conflict with liberal democratic rights and stated principles. Accordingly, teachers can use a number of approaches to ensure conformity with structural constraints, all the while helping pupils to critically engage with religious ethics, precisely through the expansion of religious literacy.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Profs Maxwell and Hirsch examine how illiberal and discriminatory aspects of religious belief and practice may be portrayed in a religious education class.

Detail

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Bio

Bruce Maxwell is Professor of Education at the University of Montreal. A former humanities teacher at the college level, he now teaches ethics and law for educators and preparatory courses relating to Quebec's statutory ethics and world religions curriculum. His research

and writings focus on ethical issues in education and ethical development through teaching and learning in schools.

Sivane Hirsch is a full Professor of Education at the University of Quebec Trois-Rivières. Her research deals with the intersection of religion and education in secular societies, in particular the issue of recognising religious and other forms of diversity in the curriculum and in teaching practice. She also does work on learning about and discussing socially and ethically controversial issues in schools.

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Collaborators

The original text was written by Bruce Maxwell and Sivane Hirsch, based on different projects regarding the treatment of sensitive issues in the classroom. While Hirsch studies the pedagogical challenges these issues represent for teachers (FRQSC), Maxwell analyses the legal aspects of this teaching.

References

Maxwell, B. and Hirsch, S. (2020). Dealing with illiberal and discriminatory aspects of faith in religious education: a case study of Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 41(2), 162–178. Available at: <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1718911>



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Personal Response

What inspired you to conduct this research?

“ In our work teaching university modules and conducting continuing education workshops, we are in contact with many in- and pre-service teachers involved in faith studies in schools. One of the concerns most often expressed by these educators is uncertainty about how to reconcile their professional obligation as public school teachers to promote equal rights and social democratic values with their obligation, as religious education teachers, to remain impartial when dealing with controversial issues in class, including controversial issues related to religious faith. It is, quite understandably, sometimes hard for teachers to clearly distinguish in their minds criticising religions and adopting a critical approach to teaching about religion. Furthermore, some teachers are afraid to discuss these issues and feel ill-prepared to take on such potentially inflammatory topics in class. Events like the gruesome beheading of a teacher in France represent their worst nightmare. The chill effect is real. Since the religious education curriculum itself rarely provides guidance in this regard, writing this article was for us a way to think through this difficult tension and suggest to teachers a way to see through the impasse. ”