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Review of Biondo III and Fiala's "Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education"

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Vincent F. Biondo III and Andrew Fiala (eds.)

*Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education*

*New York: Routledge, 2013 hb 234pp $135.00
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The bedeviling challenge of teaching about religion in public school classrooms is layered with controversy and conflict, often due to concerns that at least some teachers are prone to promote particular religious views. A commitment to overcome those challenges unifies the varied voices in *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education.* Obstacles include local contexts that make implementation of legal requirements difficult, hot-button issues that derail attempts at productive discourse, and relativism that dismisses difference. In the eyes of the contributing authors, these and other rude realities do not excuse anyone from the responsibility. However, opinions vary concerning how to accomplish this mission.

Several chapters address the topic as a matter of law and individual rights. Charles Haynes explains the legal foundation and guidelines for teaching about religion and respecting religious viewpoints through the “civic public school” model. Bruce Grelle takes a similar path with the “First Amendment Consensus Approach.”

Vincent Biondo counters that rights-based education exacerbates social division. He promotes the “Five Freedoms,” a moral common ground approach. Others join Biondo in emphasizing development of a healthy pluralism. Jedd Medefind advocates replacing mere tolerance with a “robust pluralism” that can counteract cultural forces encouraging tribalism. He suggests, “Private religion expressed for the public good may be the one force strong enough to counteract social fragmentation” (p. 35). Andrew Fiala also asserts that mere tolerance is insufficient. In his view, the challenge is to avoid a “soft pluralism,” and “instead, we should frankly admit the depth of our differences and affirm our diversity, while also embracing civility” (p. 59).
The cultural studies method is the backbone of the text. Diane Moore emphasizes the necessity of this approach in order to alleviate the ignorance and antagonism that religious illiteracy foments. Different ideas on implementing the method include Martha Smith Roberts's encouragement that schools embrace aspirational pluralism and teach students to evaluate culture and history through that lens. Jeffrey Dueck believes that dismissing or avoiding exclusive religious truth claims is misguided. His prescription is to present the big ideas concerning religion, to celebrate the positive, to point to what has been damaging, and to "find common denominators and contextual boundaries within which discussions and assessments can occur" (p. 71). Tim Mosteller also weighs in on how to help students process competing truth claims in ways that do not lead to the conclusion that all beliefs are equally true or equally false.

The lived experience of religion is key to addressing religious illiteracy, according to Harry Goldschmidt and many others. Charles Haynes believes the "Face to Faith" program is another worthy relational strategy. Engagement difficulties, such as local backlash when trips to mosques trigger negative media reports, are not addressed. This omission illustrates a thin area of the book. Apart from Jonathan Herman's essay on character education as a vehicle to introduce ("smuggle" is the term he uses) religious content into schools, little attention is paid to micropolitics.

For the most part, this book is for academics, but considerable effort is made to engage those who work in the world of K–12 schools. For example, the curriculum development projects and other stories from the field provide exemplars. Also, most of the contributions orbit around the ideas and issues addressed in the Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States, adopted by the American Academy of Religion in 2010, regardless of whether that document is explicitly noted (e.g., Colleen Windham-Hughes's piece on teaching relational and procedural literacies).

Few of the contributors appear adequately cognizant of the gap between the proposals and current practice. For example, the editors suggest avoiding lightening-rod issues in classrooms, as they are "toxic to interreligious cooperation and civil discourse" (p. 9). Skillful teachers routinely use current cultural conflicts as hooks for student engagement.

The desire "to instill democratic values such as respect for disagreement, and basic human values such as extending hospitality to strangers"
(p. 13) is likely to elicit nods of agreement all around, at least until you begin to dig into what Americans actually mean by such lofty terms. *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education* provides many important resources for doing that digging and shines the light on several of the most explosive issues. Nevertheless, it may underestimate the potency of the conflict it addresses.

Gary Sehorn