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Wertheimer's "Faith Ed.: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance" (Book Review)

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Linda K. Wertheimer

Faith Ed.: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance

Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015 pb 211pp \$25.95

ISBN 978-0-8070-8616-2

Linda K. Wertheimer is a distinguished journalist and her considerable skills are employed in this book as she explores religious intolerance in schools. A rash of anti-Semitic incidents in her own progressive, affluent suburb triggered worries that her son would share her own experiences of childhood intolerance as a Jewish girl in a Christian community. She wondered what schools could do to battle intolerance and visited communities where religious conflict made headlines to investigate. The result is an engaging work of narrative journalism.

The first stop is the Piney Woods country of East Texas where high school students took “selfies” while trying on traditional clothing worn by faithful Muslims and shared those images via social media. While the national blowback is detailed, the focus is on the town of Lumberton and its people. As a strongly Christian and conservative community, Lumberton provides a lens through which Wertheimer considers Texas’ “messy relationship with religion and the public schools” (p. 2).

Back in her home region—New England—complaints about a middle school field trip to a mosque became news through a posted video of some of the boys joining in prayer. A full examination of the sixth grade course is included along with the high-profile community conflict that ensued.

Next, the plight of a non-profit leader seeking to improve relations between his Muslim community and non-Muslim Americans is presented. Accusations of his organizations’ affiliation with terrorism triggered a noisy skirmish in a Tampa school district when he spoke at

a high school class. Wertheimer's first-person account of the tension-filled public testimony before the school board provides a dramatic touch.

The fourth chapter is set in Wichita, Kansas. The chapter highlights the city's notoriety in the culture wars. It is home to Westboro Baptist Church, which sends protesters around the country to deliver messages of God's wrath. It also has a unique place in the history of the anti-abortion movement as the site of Operation Rescue's "Summer of Mercy" in 1991 and the murder of abortion provider George Tiller in 2009. Wertheimer tells the story of an elementary school's world religions curriculum, which begins in first grade. Parental concerns about positive portrayals of Islam ignited a wildfire of opposition, and the question of the appropriate age for students to begin the comparative study of religion was raised.

Wertheimer sprinkles the first chapters of the book with references to her own childhood. She finally tells her story of growing up Jewish in the rural Midwest. Central to her experience was "The Church Lady," a volunteer who came to her classroom once a week to deliver Bible lessons. Her meeting with the elderly Church Lady to compare memories and perceptions is both emotional for Wertheimer and illuminating for the reader.

The final story comes from Modesto, California, where a required high school course in world religions is profiled. Wertheimer details how the program emerged from a cultural rift in the community between Evangelicals and progressives. The resulting curriculum is presented as a positive example hammered out in the most unlikely of settings.

The book's goal is to encourage programmatic solutions to intolerance, and Wertheimer has a core belief that public school curriculum is essential to "softening" religious intolerance. Along with rich descriptions of the all too common heated school board meetings, personal attacks, and frantic attempts by school leaders to manage the chaos, she explores the varied

understandings of the terms “educate,” “indoctrinate,” and “convert.” Throughout her stories, Wertheimer points to positive efforts that are impeded or thwarted by stiff opposition, generally in the form of conservative Christians in the local community.

As a public personality, her identity both draws and repels individuals when she enters conflict-ridden settings. Wertheimer gives voice to the marginalized, especially students who endure religious intolerance. However, she fails to confront the effect of how she is perceived by the conservative Christians she portrays. Most of those she presents as hindering progress on this issue are likely to view her as “the enemy”: a liberal, Eastern media elite.

Wertheimer’s analysis and solutions are not convincing. However, the rich descriptions of places and events, the people met along the way, and the opportunity to get deep into conflicts engaging real people facing real issues that are messy and troubling are not to be missed.

Wertheimer is a master storyteller, and this book is filled with remarkable stories.

Gary Sehorn