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ON HOLY GROUND - THE THEORY AND
PRACTICE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

by Liam Gearon

*Reviewed by Ken Badley, Professor of Education at George Fox University,
Newberg, Oregon*

On Holy Ground - the Theory and Practice of Religious Education *by Liam Gearon*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 216 pages, ISBN 978-0-415-51710-2

With *On Holy Ground*, Routledge adds a thoughtful and welcome volume to its growing list of titles related to religious education and Christian education. Gearon begins by taking his readers on a sobering tour of the rejection of the sacred, which rejection he views as the root of the modern project. After making stops at Darwin, Kant, and Marx, Gearon notes that religious education in the modern period requires 'a close reading of the texts of modernity' (p. 4). While Gearon does not burden his readers with too many details of

such a reading, he does provide evidence throughout his volume that he has done that reading himself.

He notes the three choices facing contemporary schools and school systems regarding religious education: do and say nothing about religion, allow confessional education, offer education about religion (which I call *EAR*). While all three offer challenges both to educators and to believers, the third presents a particular problem for Gearon. That problem is this: believers consider religion to be about the holy, but *EAR* cannot or will not or does not know how to deal with the holy; it deals only with observable religious phenomena. Including *EAR* in the curriculum leaves the adversaries of religious

education unsatisfied because they prefer the removal (p. 9) of religion from schools (and possibly from society) altogether. But the omission of the holy or sacred from EAR leaves the believer unsatisfied as well. Given this lack of satisfaction on both sides, how should we proceed at this time? This is the question that Gearon sets out to answer in *On Holy Ground*.

Gearon explores the questions of EAR and religious education through several lenses, starting with philosophy and theology (chapter 2) and the natural sciences (chapter 3). In all the chapters except the first and last, he uses the respective lens to examine the postures of both the adversary and the believer toward religious education. With its references to Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, and Dewey's critiques of religious belief (and the defenses offered by Schleiermacher and others), the philosophy chapter is perhaps the toughest sledding in the book, although Gearon does provide a readable review of religious education's response to and appropriations of philosophy in the last few decades. Here, as throughout the book, he demonstrates his control over a vast literature. Combining that control with clear writing at most points, Gearon serves his readers well as he surveys the challenging philosophical and theological terrain of the last three centuries.

Chapter 3 views religious education through the lens of the natural sciences. Here, in a treatment ranging from the Deists through Darwin and the new atheists to Hawking, he traces the challenge that the natural sciences have presented to religious belief and thereby to religious education. On his account, believers have responded to the natural sciences by attempting to accommodate at some points and refusing to do so at others. Gearon's chapters on the

social sciences (chapter 4) and psychology (chapter 5) review the same range of responses—accommodation to resistance—within which he framed chapter 3. In Gearon's hands, the social sciences may present a more formidable challenge to religious education than do the natural sciences. Historically, the social sciences both observed the erosion of the sense of the holy and they contributed to that erosion. But Gearon traces more recent developments as well, including the bumps encountered in recent years by the secularization thesis and the recent interest in spirituality, as opposed to organized religion.

Following a brief chapter in which he outlines how religious education and phenomenology aided each other mutually, Gearon turns to the politics of religious education in chapter 7. In this chapter, Gearon traces the evolving relationship between church and state, including contemporary discussions in liberal democracies regarding what to do about religious education or EAR in schools.

Chapter 8, 'The aesthetics of religious education,' might, without harm, be retitled 'Aesthetics and Religious Belief.' In it, Gearon makes the case that the arts offer not only an alternative epistemology to that on offer in the sciences, but an epistemology more amenable to religious belief. This chapter and the one following, 'The Holy and the Idea of the Holy,' are really of a piece, and, in my view, worth the price of the book. Gearon concludes by calling his readers to look for epistemological foundations for religious education among such people as Augustine, John Bunyan and Thérèse of Lisieux. *On Holy Ground* is intellectual history at its best and it is not light reading, but to those willing to do some work, it yields up rich rewards.