Editorial

Religion, Education, Security

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Received: 19 April 2019; Accepted: 8 May 2019; Published: 16 May 2019

Abstract: On first glance the politicization and securitization of religion may seem remote from education. A second look reveals widespread international initiatives aimed at the uses of education precisely for political and security purposes, notably in the countering of terrorism, violent extremism and ideologies opposed to liberal democratic values. This editorial presents a critical framing on how scholars from a range of interrelated disciplines analyze the interface of religion, education and security. The purpose of this Special Issue is thus critically to engage scholars across religious studies and theology, politics and international relations, security and intelligence studies, to explore through empirical evidence and reasoned argument the role here for religion in education. The volume aims to make some ground-breaking cross-disciplinary theoretical advances and methodological innovations not simply to further debate but to provide the tools for asking new questions and opening new pathways and frameworks for exploring the critical interface of religion, education and security.

Keywords: religion; security; education; terrorism; counter-terrorism; security studies; intelligence studies; political theology


In the present, the resurgence of religion in public life has been marked by intense debates over global governance (Burleigh 2009; Davis et al. 2007; Habermas 2006, 2008; Haynes 2008, 2009; Huntington 2002; Wood et al. 2016), issues which now permeate international religious education (Davis and Miroshnikova 2017). These debates have often been framed as variant forms of political theology (De Vries and Sullivan 2006; Schussler Fiorenza et al. 2013; Scott and Cavanaugh 2011). Critically, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere has marked too by reconsiderations of secularization theory (Berger 1999; Bruce 2002; Davie et al. 2008; Habermas 2008; Habermas and Ratzinger 2007; Stark 1999; Taylor 2007).

Concurrently, across security and intelligence studies, theorists have noted a marked expansion or ‘securitization’ to a number of different domains (Albert and Buzan 2011; Buzan 2007; Collins 2018; Dunn Cavelty and Balzacq 2016; Taureck 2006; Wæver 1995; Huysmans 1998; also Seiple et al. 2011). Securitization theory presents a means of exposure, a frame of exposition and a method of analysis of this claimed expansion of security across five such areas of human experience: military, political, societal, economic, and environmental (Huysmans 1998; Van Munster 2016). Bagge Laustsen and Wæver (2000), even prior to 9/11, suggested adding a sixth category of religion.

On first glance the politicization and securitization of religion may seem remote from education. A second look reveals widespread international initiatives aimed at the uses of education precisely for political and security purposes, notably in the countering of terrorism, violent extremism and ideologies opposed to liberal democratic values (Ghosh et al. 2016). The European Agenda on Security...
(EAS 2015) has here increasingly drawn universities into the fray, while in the UK specifically, the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 has given public bodies, including educational institutions, legislative responsibilities for maintaining and enhancing security and preventing terrorism, and the ideologies which allow terrorism to flourish. The editor’s conceptualisations of the ‘counter-terrorist classroom’ (Gearon 2013) and the ‘counter-terrorist campus’ (Gearon 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018; Gearon and Prud’homme 2018) have sparked at times vituperative debate (Jackson 2015; Lewin 2017).

The central aim of this volume is critically to engage scholars across religious studies and theology, politics and international relations, security and intelligence studies, to explore through empirical evidence and reasoned argument the role here for religion in education.

In the opening article Joseph Prud’homme’s ‘Security, Religion, and Political Culture: A Defense of Weak Disestablishment’ provides a critical analysis of the role of religion, the state and education in the United States. Drawing on a thesis advanced in Gearon and Prud’homme (2018), Prud’homme notes that many in the West have long argued against state religious establishments on the ethical grounds of the rights of freedom of conscience and personal autonomy. Prud’homme extends such analyses to explore the impact of religious disestablishment on state provision of security and preventing violent extremism in education.

Pia-Maria Niemi, Arto Kallioniemi and Ratna Ghosh’s ‘Religion as a Human Right and a Security Threat—Investigating Young Adults’ Experiences of Religion in Finland’ examines the pedagogical and wider educational implications of the emergence of religiously motivated terrorist attacks and xenophobia across Europe from a Scandinavian perspective. Finely juxtaposing the tensions between rights and threats, or security and liberty, their empirical data highlights findings which open the field for further comparative and international study.

Pia-Maria Niemi, Saija Benjamin, Arniika Kuusisto and Liam Gearon’s ‘How and Why Education Counters Ideological Extremism in Finland’ also examines the Finnish context, examining how the intensification of radical and extremist thinking has become an international cause of concern and the fear related to terrorism has increased worldwide, and, while mindful of such international contexts, shows what such impacts have meant in practical, pedagogical terms for Finnish Education.

The renowned scholar on religion and global politics, Jeffrey Haynes examines religion, education and security from precisely such a worldwide perspective by assessing the relationship between the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations and educational and policy notions of global citizenship.

Robyn Sneath’s article is ‘Fancy Schools for Fancy People: Risks and Rewards in Fieldwork Research Among the Low German Mennonites of Canada and Mexico’. Detailing her research on modern-day Mennonites she provides an historical note on the 1920s exodus of 8000 Mennonites from the Canadian prairie provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico and Paraguay, as a matter of particular as well as wider theoretical importance to the special issue’s theme. Providing a methodological addendum on historical and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion, education and security, Sneath reminds us that history can teach us much about these matters of acute contemporary relevance.

Isaac Calvert’s ‘Sanctifying Security: Jewish Approaches to Religious Education in Jerusalem’ demonstrates precisely how the historical and contemporary significance of religion and security in education still have momentous geopolitical charge. Drawing on his groundbreaking ethnographic fieldwork in Jerusalem, Calvert treats in situ of the critical pedagogical meeting place of politics and theology in twenty-first century Jewish education.

Liam Gearon’s ‘The Educational Sociology and Political Theology of Disenchantment: From the Secularization to the Securitization of the Sacred’ draws significantly on two theorists who have helped shape sociological and political theological thinking—Weber (1946, 2015) and Carl Schmitt (2005)—Gearon provides an outline theoretical synthesis of educational sociological and political theology, through the concept of ‘disenchantment’ to afford insights on critical current debates around secularization and securitization in education.
Terence Lovat’s ‘Securing Security in Education: The Role of Public Theology and a Case Study in Global Jihadism’ argues for the theoretical and methodological tool of public theology as a vital adjunct to contemporary education’s addressing of security issues in light of current world events with indisputable religious and arguably quasi-theological foundations.

The volume here initiates some ground-breaking cross-disciplinary theoretical advances and methodological innovations not simply to further debate but to provide the tools for asking new questions and opening new pathways and frameworks for exploring the critical interface of religion, education and security.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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