

**Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent:
Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada**

*Graham P. McDonough, Nadeem A. Memon, and Avi I. Mintz, eds.
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During the 2007 provincial election campaign, Conservative party candidate John Tory proposed extending government funding to all faith-based schools in Ontario. This was met with strong public and media opposition due to fears of radicalization and indoctrinating students in religious beliefs considered outdated and a threat to Canadian norms (particularly with Islamic schools). It is with this anecdote that editors Graham P. McDonough, Nadeem Memon, and Avi L. Mintz introduce *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent: Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic Schooling in Canada*. As they note, the impassioned debate surrounding Tory's election promise, as well as his ensuing loss, indicate that religious education is a particularly contentious topic in an increasingly secular society. And yet there is surprisingly little scholarly literature on this topic.

The editors seek to address this gap through this excellent and much needed contribution to the field. Focusing solely on Catholic, Islamic, and Jewish schools, which make up the vast majority of Canada's full-time religious schools, the editors seek not to provide an overview of religious education, but to address three issues: The schools' aims and practices, how they "negotiate the tension between the demands of the faith and the expectation that they educate Canadian citizens," and how they "respond to internal dissent."

The book's nine chapters are divided into three sections, "Devotion," "Discipline," and "Dissent," respectively, each of which contains three essays. The structure is one of the book's strengths, as it ensures that the three overarching questions are all addressed, albeit to differing degrees, by Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim scholars and educators. Catholic schools in Canada have been well established for over a century, and thus the chapters on Catholic education focus on philosophical and moral questions. Mario O. D'Souza outlines the epistemological underpinnings of holistic education and character building, while J. Kent Donlevy and Graham P. McDonough consider how these schools can address religious teachings that are increasingly at odds with the values of the general public.

Although the chapters on Islamic and Jewish schools also examine these themes, they tend to focus on more practical concerns, such as the challenges of establishing religious schools, designing curriculum, and addressing internal dissent. This is especially a concern for Canada's seventy-four Jewish day schools, which are the focus of Seymour Epstein's chapter. Epstein provides a thorough overview of their, theological foundations, and curriculum, and also outlines how they represent a very diverse population, *ranging from secular and community schools to Modern Orthodox, Reform Judaism, Charedi and Sephardic institutions* (p. 32).

In "The Changed Context for Jewish Day-School Education," one of the most fascinating chapters, Alex Pomson and Randal F. Schnoor introduce readers to Toronto's Downtown Jewish Day School (DJDS), a non-denominational, non-Orthodox community school in which they conducted a four-year research study. The school's unconventional approach focuses on Jewish culture and identity rather than orthodoxy. Therefore parents and educators regularly debate such issues as kosher dietary practices, religious holidays, and uniforms. The co-authors argue that such conflict is inevitable in a progressive school like DJDS, where there is so much diversity in "people's values, commitments, and expectations" (p. 176). However they, as well as Mintz, one of the book's editors, reflect on how such debate can, to a certain degree, be constructive for all religious schools in order to acknowledge and work through differences while sharing a mutual sense of respect and belonging.

Nadeem Memon outlines the history and concerns of full-time Islamic school, the first one of which was established in 1977 in Mississauga, ON. First he draws from the work of Naquib Al-Attas to explore if and how such Islamic concepts such as "*ta'lim* (direct instruction), *tarbiyah* (nurturing wholeness), *tazkiyah* (personal development) and *ta'dib* (comportment)" (p. 75) are actualized in Islamic schools. Asma Ahmed also considers character education and other matters raised by Memon in her "London Islamic School:

Millstone or Milestone?" Ahmed's study, conducted at the London Islamic School (LIS) in London, ON, draws from the work of Tariq Ramadan and his three-stage model of integration (p. 149). She nicely utilizes his framework in considering how LIS and other Islamic schools can ensure that they integrate character and religious education and produce confident, engaged citizens without compromising academic quality.

One of the book's most central and relevant themes, given the general public's concern about whether religious education aligns with and prepares students for modern secular society, is the struggle faced by these schools, particularly Catholic and Islamic ones, in addressing such controversial issues as sexuality, contraception, and gender roles. Citing recent human rights challenges involving the church, Donlevy posits that there will inevitably be conflict between divine law and secular man-made laws. He argues that "regardless of the pressures from the wider secular society," the church and thus Catholic schools have the right to engage in just vs. unjust discrimination in cases that do not conform to the Magesterium, while ensuring that respect and compassion are shown to all members of society (pp. 127, 130)

Unlike Donlevy, who focuses on homosexuality in Catholic schools, McDonough addresses contraception, arguing that controversial issues should be discussed and even debated within those schools, particularly since many Catholic youth reject the church's ruling on contraception (p. 190). His view is premised on the belief that students in Catholic and other faith-based schools should receive pedagogical and intellectual support from educators, regardless of their position on the church's teachings. Although Donlevy's position would likely be unpopular among the general public, particularly in Ontario where Catholic schools are publicly funded, including his chapter reflects the diversity between and within Canada's faith-based schools.

Qaiser Ahmad considers how the Toronto Islamic school in which he taught for six years approaches controversial issues. He observes that although the vast majority of North American Islamic schools are based on Sunni Orthodoxy, which is followed by over 85 percent of the world's Muslims (p. 227), Islamic (and other religious) schools cannot be neatly categorized and labeled as either "strong" or "moderate" because such binary oppositions are simplistic and reinforce stereotypes. In fact, many schools are both strong and moderate. For example, Ahmad's school gives students a strong foundation in Islamic knowledge and beliefs, encourages them to engage in critical thinking and questioning, and teaches Islamic perspectives on relationships and sexuality. They also inform students about contraception and how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases. Ahmad believes that the goal of faith-based schools is to enable students to become active and positive members of the greater Canadian society

while remaining confident in their beliefs and not feeling pressured to compromise or reform due to external forces (pp. 217, 219). This emphasis on character development and citizenship education is championed by all of the book's contributors, who consider how their respective schools can – and must – ensure that they graduate active and engaged citizens who contribute to and accept Canada's diversity.

This is particularly relevant for Islamic schools in the post-9/11 climate, for North American Muslims are constantly misrepresented in the media and forced to justify – even apologize – for their (real or perceived) religious beliefs and practices, which are seen as incongruent with Canadian and western norms and values. This can be particularly difficult for the youth. It is unfortunate and surprising that only Qaiser Ahmad, and to some degree Asma Ahmed, discuss how Islamic schools can – and do – empower and inform Muslim youth in the face of these obstacles. Ahmad also rightly argues that Islamic schools must not deny the violence and injustice committed in the name of religion, but rather help their students understand that Islam does not condone such actions and that they are due to various socio-cultural factors (p. 221).

Despite citizenship being promoted throughout the book and in nearly all of the schools referenced, concerns about the latter's ability to educate and produce democratically engaged, civic-minded students who are integrated and contributing to mainstream society are again raised in the concluding chapter. Mintz proposes that religious schools show their commitment and approaches to citizenship education to ease these concerns (pp. 245, 246). Although he rightfully argues that citizenship education must be an integral part of the curriculum, many religious schools, including those mentioned, are aware of this duty, perhaps even more so than the majority of publicly funded secular schools. It is well documented that the latter do not adequately accommodate or acknowledge religious minorities, and that Sikh and Muslim students in particular face so much discrimination from peers and educators that they may feel conflicted and pressured to assimilate or enroll in religious schools. Therefore, perhaps here Mintz could have focused on how *all* schools can instill respect and acceptance of diversity and difference in students via effective citizenship education. But this is only a minor concern with an otherwise excellent and much needed contribution that addresses many of the issues and concerns with faith-based schools. Given this ongoing controversy in Canada, *Discipline, Devotion, and Dissent* can ideally help foster a healthier and more informed debate about the role of religious schools there.

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