

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Religion and Belief Literacy: Reconnecting a Chain of Learning**, by Adam Dinham, with Alp Arat and Martha Shaw, Bristol: Policy Press/Bristol University Press, 2021, vii + 197 pp., £79.99 (hb), £26.99 (pb), ISBN 978-1-4473-4463-6 (hb), ISBN 978-1-4473-4465-0 (pb), ISBN 978-1-4473-4466-7 (ePub), ISBN 978-1-4473-4464-3 (ePDF)

Readers of this journal are probably involved in teaching about religions and other beliefs, whether in universities or schools, and may have an opinion on how their teaching sits with the wider patterns of learning on these topics, both in formal education and beyond: how does one's work slot into a greater whole? Adam Dinham's thought-provoking book presents an ambitious argument that seeks to do justice to this issue, by outlining a coherent vision of 'religion and belief literacy' in the public sphere, across multiple settings. He builds on his own considerable research on different elements of this topic, with the involvement of two co-researchers—Alp Arat and Martha Shaw.

The book's structure is clear. The introduction and first chapter diagnose the ailment: a 'broken chain of learning about religion and belief'. Dinham argues that in England there had once been a connection between religious education, schools more widely, universities (both their practices and teaching), professional education, and community education, but this connection was lost in the post-war development

of the welfare state. The remaining chapters take the reader through each area, exploring its individual 'muddles', and the conclusion considers how these collectively contribute to the overall fracturing. Dinham then outlines how they should be reconnected effectively.

The breadth of vision is striking. The diagnoses of the challenges in each area are thought-provoking. Where I have some expertise (Religious Education and schools), I found Dinham's account robust; it is valuable to be taken through these sections and then to the other areas, workplace or community learning, to consider how the different elements might come together under a coherent aim. The book's other strength is that the topic is not simply articulated as 'religious literacy', but as 'religion and belief literacy', thereby signalling a wider range of positions, both archetypal non-religions but also more diffuse spiritualities.

Given its broad merits, there are three points to make within a wider conversation in taking this analysis and agenda forward. First is the relationship between 'religion and belief literacy' and religious nurture. Dinham's argument is for an inter-belief competence, but where and how does this align or conflict with more traditional forms of religious education/instruction? For example, the discussion about Religious Education (RE) in schools does not fully address the place of RE in 'faith schools': should one replace the other or be offered in addition? If so, what are the curricular and pedagogical implications of doing both? Similarly, there might be implications for youth work within religious institutions—if not directly, then indirectly. The kinds of workplace competences that Dinham identifies would not

obviously be addressed by religious nurture, but, paradoxically, the competences are needed because individuals have been nurtured within particular religions or traditions. A colleague or client or patient has to be, for example, Ahmadiyya, Catholic or Humanist for someone to need this literacy and one also has to hold this literacy alongside one's own beliefs, which may well have been developed through a different religious nurture. These twin strands mean that different, more traditional sites—churches or *madrassahs*—are also potentially implicated in this new project. Indeed, pragmatically, if they do not, the project is likely to fail.

Secondly, there is a purely historical question about the claim that the pre-war chain of learning was broken by the establishment of the post-war welfare state. I would question whether there was a fully established chain of religious literacy because many of the structural challenges to a coherent shared chain lie within the longstanding legal rights to freedom of belief, especially for parents to raise their children in their own beliefs. The legal rights around religious education from early nineteenth century onwards are predicated on a model of parental, intra-familial transmission, not on a shared literacy for the public sphere. The point matters because these rights still exist and indeed are arguably more strongly entrenched now, in the UK and in international human rights law.

Thirdly, however, the current conditions for re-linking the chain are not simply about reversing the effects of the welfare state or recognizing diversity of belief; the other significant shift is in the switch to neoliberal forms of governance under which personal choice is paramount; this has long been influential in educational policy and

is increasingly so in relation to the political economy of religions. Religion is a core part of the educational market choice for parents and the demands of this new literacy would cut across a key point of differentiation.

Overall, Dinham sets out a broad and ambitious agenda. He raises novel questions that are both academic, in terms of explaining the broken chain, but also urgent in terms of seeking to re-forge it. Further work both on these two aspects and on their inter-relationship is certainly needed.

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