

BOOK REVIEW

Religious Education and the Anglo-World: The Impact of Empire, Britishness, and Decolonisation in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand

Author: Stephen Jackson

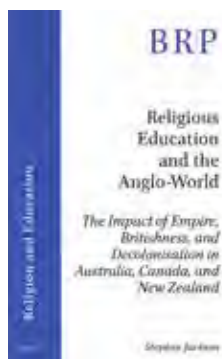
Publisher: Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 2020

ISBN: 978-90-04-43216-1

Paperback, 98 pages

Price: \$146.97

Reviewed by Jeff Kildea*



Across a number of areas of historical inquiry the focus is increasingly becoming transnational. By moving away from national studies and comparing the development of subjects across a number of countries, it is hoped to uncover deeper truths concerning those areas of study.

Such exploration of the similarities and differences between experiences in different jurisdictions is thought to help distil essential features and better discern underlying dynamics. By removing the blinkers of a national perspective we are led to see there were other ways to solve the problems of the past and we are thus emboldened to canvass a wider range of solutions to the problems of the present.

Colin Barr's *Ireland's Empire: The Roman Catholic Church in the English-Speaking World*, separately reviewed in this issue, is one example of this trend towards transnational history. Another is Stephen Jackson's *Religious Education and the Anglo-World*. Its subtitle, 'The Impact of Empire, Britishness, and Decolonisation in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand' sets its parameters less ambitiously than *Ireland's Empire*.

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Religious Education and the Anglo-World at 76 pages of text and 22 pages of bibliography is essentially an extended historiographical essay that, with regard to the three countries under review, brings the ‘disparate national literatures into conversation with one another’ with the aim of promoting ‘a greater transnational approach to the study of religious education in the Anglo-World’ (p. 1).

Jackson’s essay is a recent addition to Brill Research Perspectives, a series which Netherlands-based publisher Brill describes as ‘the authoritative source for the state of scholarship’ across a number of subjects in the humanities. Under that rubric *Religious Education and the Anglo-World* is certainly a worthy contribution.

Jackson’s basic thesis is: ‘Local circumstances, historical contingencies, and human agency provided each national or state-level system with unique features, but all of them experienced the transnational formative influence of empire’ (p.4). That influence, which Jackson says, ‘profoundly shaped religious education’ in the three countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, derived from the common experience of ‘settler colonialism and the Anglo-World system’.

His analysis centres on three formative eras: the foundations of religious education systems in the mid- to late nineteenth century; the consolidation of religious education systems from 1880 to 1960; and the widespread reform movements in religious education as the attachment to Britishness weakened in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to Jackson, ‘educators across the Anglo-World looked to each other for ideas, educational materials, and systems to emulate as they all addressed common challenges of public education.’ (p.6). One of the common challenges for the three countries in their early development was how to teach religion to children while promoting a unifying transnational identity in an empire which was dominated by a virulently anti-Catholic Protestantism but which had large Catholic minorities. Furthermore, during the decolonisation phase of their development, ‘The loss of an identity centred on the British Empire generated a great deal of soul searching on the topic of religious education’ (p. 7).

Jackson argues that the Anglo-World system moulded religious education in four primary ways: it promoted a transnational identity called ‘Britishness’ that embraced Protestantism as an important ideal; in the settler colonies it

used migrant selection processes (e.g. the White Australia policy) to ensure only migrants of the ‘right type’ were allowed to enter; it navigated the complication of the ‘extraordinary levels of Irish Roman Catholic migration and the explosively tendentious relationship between Britain and Ireland’; and it transmitted ‘quotidian practices of imitation, borrowing, and modelling’.

Nevertheless, the large Irish Catholic presence in the settler colonies challenged Protestant assumptions of Britishness, while fears of radical Irish nationalism led to discrimination against Catholics, making it difficult to settle the issue of religious education for more than a century. In this regard Jackson regards as particularly important the struggle of Irish Catholics for state funding of their schools.

For those interested in the history of religious education in Australia, or more generally across the empire, *Religious Education and the Anglo-World* is a valuable resource, both as a source of bibliographical information as well as a wellspring of highly developed ideas on the subject. But with a recommended retail price of 96 euros, many potential readers will be discouraged unless they can persuade their school, college or local library to acquire a copy.