



**An Essay Review of  
*On Holy Ground: The Theory and Practice of Religious Education***

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Gearon, L. (2014). *On Holy Ground: The Theory and Practice of Religious Education*.  
New York: Routledge.

Pp. 216

ISBN 978-0-415-51710-2

Relying on classic books and articles written by philosophers and other scholars, Liam Gearon tries in his book to explore the philosophical and historical roots of religious education, with a focus on the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods. The author argues that “*On Holy Ground* examines the re-reading of the holy through the texts of modernity, not simply in its rejection of revelation as a source of knowledge but more widely, the loss of the sacred and the conscious removal of sacred-profane, holy-unholy distinctions” (p. 3). The idea of enlightenment is defined in the book based on the contribution of many scholars, and particularly the writings of Immanuel Kant, who focuses on the freedom to think, to reason, and to get autonomy in thinking and action. Also, the author argues throughout the book that “Enlightenment is as much an attitude as an epistemology” (p. 14). This means that Enlightenment relies on the separation of the idea of the holy from the holy, and this is reflected in philosophers’ and scholars’ efforts to find alternative epistemologies to explain, justify, and interpret the separation of religious education from religious life.

The book includes nine chapters. The first and last chapters include the introduction of the book as well as a summary of the main dilemmas and points discussed. Chapters Two through Eight examine the epistemological grounds of religious education as it has developed and has been understood by scholars and philosophers in the fields of philosophy, natural science, social sciences, psychology, phenomenology, politics, and aesthetics. Gearon reviews the debates and tensions of faith versus reason, creationism versus scientism, the theological versus the secular, and public versus private as they have been discussed and represented over

time by proponents and opponents of religion in the disciplines above. In this historical analysis, the author tries to answer the epistemological, moral, and existential question of what the grounds of religious education are, if religious education is no longer grounded in the religious life. At the end of each chapter the author also briefly discusses how the different disciplines have informed the field of religious education in schools.

In the second chapter, which deals with philosophy, theology, and religious education, the author discusses the debates about religious education in schools and whether religious education is based on a distinctive knowledge, and is therefore impossible to teach within a secular and liberal curriculum; some scholars have argued that religion is indeed a distinctive mode of knowledge, but it may nevertheless be taught in schools. Also, there is a controversy among scholars about whether schools can provide children with the philosophical tools needed to evaluate religious truth claims, and to choose, in the name of liberal education, the truth claim which makes the most sense to them. It is assumed that this approach in teaching religion will lead to inter-religious tolerance and may work against fundamentalism of all kinds. On the other hand, this kind of pedagogy has been attacked by religious and social conservatives, who have argued that this will reduce the meaning and purpose of religious experience to epistemological measures. One resolution is suggested by Puolimatka and Tirri (2000) who suggest education for “intelligent belief” and a dialogical engagement in religious education.

According to Lewis and Chandley (2012), “Dialogical enquiry in religious education in our classroom communities, where there can be conflict over truth claims, has an especially valuable part to play in helping young people develop their own sense of identity and belonging. Through helping them to work out, with their peers, their values and beliefs about questions relating to the origin of things and what things really matter to them, philosophical inquiry in religious education facilitates a growing appreciation of belief and culture in the world today” (p. 39).

However, other scholars have criticized ideas of dialogical inquiry, philosophical rationalism, and the use of secular and critical tools in religious education because they may oppress alternative ways of knowing (Strhan, 2010). They have argued that these methods of teaching about religions do not recognize the personal experience of religious belief and practice, and that they can be used for political manipulation. Hyslop-Margison and Peterson (2012) argue for the impossibility of examining religious truths in schools because there is a problem “articulating how religious claims might be evaluated epistemologically” (p. 40); because there is no unified or agreed upon standards to evaluate these claims among parents, teachers, and students; and because, “the ground required to support religious truth claims is itself epistemologically problematic” (p. 40). In short, there is still significant debate among scholars about the purposes of religious education in schools—whether it is important for itself, or if it is a means for other goals in society, as well as how to engage students in philosophical reasoning or in measuring the truth claims of different religions.

In the third chapter, which is about the natural sciences and religious education, the author argues that Darwin’s theory about evolution and natural selection affected religion and theology more than philosophical rationalism has. He argues that scientific development during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries challenged the definition and the meaning of what is sinful, assuming that it is context-based and that changes in the economic and social conditions of people’s lives in the last two centuries legitimized scientific input on what is right and wrong.

In recognizing the limitations of critical reasoning alone in understanding and knowing the world, Gearon relies on the contribution of Midgley (2007), who argues that “science and

religion are, in this regard, a clash not of epistemologies but functions, the former deals in facts, the latter in meaning” (p. 54). The confusion between realms of facts and meaning in anti-religious discourse has reinforced the controversy between science and religion, because “God’s existence is not a question for the tests of physical science; it belongs to metaphysics” (p. 55). At the same time, the progression of science does not exempt human beings from discussing the ethical/moral implications of science in fields such as the environment, medicine, and the military. Here, Midgley cites Einstein, who argued that religion without science is lame, and science without religion is blind.

In the fourth chapter, which is about the social sciences and religious education, the author cites Durkheim as one of the advocates for religion and its moral function in society: “Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – Beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community” (Durkheim, 2001, p. 46). By contrast, Weber’s (2002) interpretation of work as a sign of salvation and the development of capitalist economy and industrialized societies in the Protestant nations replaced the values and ideals of religion by rationalizing the modern world. Afterwards, Gearon explains the three types of secularization (linear, non-dialectical and dialectical, and non-linear models) as they have been discussed by previous sociologists, and he concluded that patterns of religious education in Europe and at the international level cannot be defined in counter-secularization terms, because they are led by secular and political movements.

In explaining the dynamic relationships between religious education and the social sciences, Gearon cites Wilhoit (1984), who argues that

“throughout this century religious education has been admonished to ground itself on the social sciences. Tremendous benefits were to result; still little has occurred. Social scientists are frustrated because their work is either ignored or misused. Religious educators are frustrated because they are not supplied with answers to the questions they judge to be significant. So it is that educational ideologies, theology, and ‘common sense’ shape and inform religious education far more than rigorous empirical findings” (Wilhoit, 1984, p. 367).

Gearon closes this chapter with a more optimistic assessment of the contribution of the social sciences to religious education by highlighting the work of Robert Jackson (1997) and his interpretive approach to religious education. According to Gearon, the advantage of this approach is that it “recognizes the inner diversity, fuzzy, edgedness, and contested nature of religious traditions, as well as the complexity of cultural expression and the change from social and individual perspectives” (p. 72). Also, Jackson’s method, which was developed relying on the work of Geertz (1973), works through the three components of representation, interpretation, and reflexivity in religious education.

In short, Jackson’s interpretive method “takes a critical stance towards western, post-Enlightenment models of representing world religions as homogeneous belief systems, whose essence is expressed through set structures and whose membership is seen in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions” (Jackson, 2011b, p. 191). It aims to educate students for recognizing, respecting, and understanding other religious traditions and their own sense of identity. Gearon concludes that religious education encompasses elements of theological, educational, and social science disciplines, and that the purpose and method of religious education depends on the meaning and end of religion itself.

The fifth chapter deals with psychology, spirituality, and religious education. Here the author reviews the different psychological theories about the development of students' faith and spirituality, with a focus on the contributions of Freud (1985) and Jung (2010). Freud views religion as a repressive mechanism which helps to control the instinctual forces within human beings, and therefore the growth of civilizations. Also, he argues that "not all desires can and should be satisfied. This would result in anarchy, disorder and ultimately, the destruction of civilization. Reason not instinct should therefore rule" (Gearon, 2014, p. 83). Freud supports conscious reason over unconscious irrationality.

Unlike Freud, Jung (2010) views the unconscious as "a vast reservoir of psychic material inherited from a primeval past" (p. 83). He highlights the significance of the integration of consciousness and unconsciousness through a process of individuation. In other words, "the irrational unconsciousness was as much a part of what it was to be human as the rationale conscious" (p. 83). Jung considers the collective unconscious and the supremacy of reason over instincts as the problems of the modern man because the focus on the rational "had led to a complete dissociation of the mind from its unconscious self" (p.84). Therefore, allowing space for the unconscious mind through religious practices, rituals, and symbols will lead to the healing of individuals and societies.

In the same chapter, the author draws on the report of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPSYCH, 2013) in order to show the distinction between religiosity and spirituality: "Religious traditions certainly include individual spirituality, which is universal. But each religion has its own distinct community-based worship, beliefs, sacred texts and traditions. Spirituality is not tied to any particular religious belief or tradition. Although culture and beliefs can play a part in spirituality, every person has their own unique experience of spirituality – it can be a personal experience of anyone, with or without a religious belief. It's there for anyone" (Gearon, 2014, p. 85).

Later in this chapter, the author explains the contribution of cognitive theories to our understanding of the development of children's faith and religious identities. The discussions of Piaget's (1957) theory of children's cognitive development and Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development have pushed the field of religious education to view the differences between religions as cultural expressions, while all human beings share essential stages of religious/spiritual development. One of the psychological models of faith development is suggested by Fowler (1981), who develops seven stages for faith development. Fowler's work, as argued by Gearon, encourages the language of spirituality rather than religiosity in education and the scholarly community. Gearon argues that understanding religion as a spiritual and/or psychological experience is seen as liberating in both philosophical as well as political terms. Philosophically, it views religion as individual meaning-making, and politically, it reduces the significance of doctrine and theology in religious education and allows for bridges between and across religions.

In chapter six, the author deals with the phenomenological aspects of religious education. Phenomenology highlights the neutrality of consciousness and "an epistemological undertaking to know things as they are in themselves" (p. 106). It gives priority to things known intuitively and to values, beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, decisions, and hopes as they are lived and expressed by human beings (Husserl, 1927). Phenomenology "enables us to understand the corresponding subjective experiences as they become conscious, as they appear" (p. 103). This means that we cannot know the world as it is, but we perceive reality as it is mediated by psychological factors, such as language, meaning-making, and intentions.

Ninian Smart (1969) is a leading figure in making the connection between phenomenology and religious studies. He describes seven components in the essence of any religion, and his theory informed religious education in schools. These are the doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, social, and material dimensions. Smart encouraged a multi-disciplinary investigation of the religious experience, and that we can understand the religious experience without necessarily being believers. Phenomenology in religious education has been criticized for its relativizing and romanticizing of religious truth and its failure to answer how open in particular to the religious perspective of others could one be without undermining a personal faith commitment. Smart's legacy in religious education is still disputed.

In chapter seven, the author addresses the politics of religious education; he argues that since the Enlightenment, "religion has been separated from political power as well as repressed by it" (p. 111). Historically, this was manifested through the development of modern liberal democracy, as well as through the rise of political extremism and totalitarianism. The establishment of the state and the secularization of sovereignty as a result of the French Revolution pushed Christianity away from defining social, political, and moral relations in society. Maier (2007) summarizes that by saying, "The supremacy of the church over the state weakens to the point where the system ultimately reverts into its opposite form: the superiority of the state over the church" (p. 197).

However, other scholars, such as Habermas (2006) and Shabani (2011), challenge the dichotomy between state and religion, and they try to answer Rawls's (2005) question: "How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who still remain profoundly divided by religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (p. 3-4). For instance, Habermas (2006) argues that "arguments from a more generously dimensioned political role for religion that are incompatible with the secular nature of the state should not be confused with justifiable objections to a secularist understanding of democracy and the rule of the law" (p.6). This means that democratic countries should maintain the impartiality of their institutions and at the same time allow religious groups and individuals to share their morality and ideals for discussion in the public sphere.

Gearon also reviews the status of religious education across the world and how it has been influenced by legal and political contexts in the book *Routledge International Handbook of Religious Education* (Davis & Miroschnikova, 2013). Then he summarizes the major trends of religious education in Europe as they are discussed by Willaime (2007) and Ferrari (2013). The first trend is one that does not for any kind of religious education in public schools. The second model allows for non-denominational and non-confessional education about religions. The third trend accepts the denominational teaching of religion for dominating religions in the country. Apparently, religious education in many countries today tries to comply with the universal standards of human rights and democratic citizenship. However, Gearon argues that one of the limitations of politicizing religious education or teaching religion with political ends in mind is the possibility of ignoring other epistemological purposes of religious education.

In Chapter Eight, the author deals with the aesthetics of religious education. He describes the Enlightenment as having two sides, the rational aspect, which led to the development of the natural scientific methods and other sciences; and the non-rational element, which stressed creativity, self-expression, and the search for meaning, and found expression in aesthetic theories. Gearon argues that "the aesthetic in religious education is not simply a means of teaching about religions but also of contributing to spiritual development" (p. 146). In

supporting the possible implications of the arts in religious education, the author cites Miller (2003, p. 211), who supported the use of visual arts:

- The use of the arts to promote awareness and the exploration of mystery and the transcendent in pupils;
- Phenomenological approaches to religious education, in which the arts enable pupils to enter empathetically into religious experience and practice;
- The promotion of pupils' spiritual development through imagination and reflection on the arts;
- Creativity as a means of expressing and deepening the understanding and religious awareness of students and their teachers.

In other words, the arts, such as drama, poetry, story, and the visual arts can be used in religious education because they promote the language of metaphor, the expression of students' inner voices, meaning, inwardness, spirituality, and the search for the sacred. As such, "the use of art in religious education has become... not simply a part of the representation of the holy but its generation, not simply a theme but a method" (p. 144).

In the last chapter, Gearon further explains the meaning of the separation of the idea of the holy from the holy, which is at the center of modern and secular religious education. He argues that three principles, or "enlightened epistemological parameters" (p. 150), illuminate the distinction between the idea of the holy and the holy. These are *rationality*, which means the autonomy of reason, freedom of will, and action at the personal and political levels; the principle of *secularity*, "a directness of purpose to worldly concern by removing the transcendent as a term accessible to reason" (p. 150); and the principle of *temporality*, which refers to "an understanding of time which, given the first two principles, focuses on the here and now" (p. 150). These principles work against the three characteristics of the holy life, which are *faith*, assuming that God alone is the guidance, the *eternal*, which means that we are living a temporal life and we need work for the eternal life in the hereafter, and *sanctification*, which assumes that "the world is an instrument not an end of the holy life" (p. 152).

One advantage of the structure of this book is that the author brings the arguments of the advocates of and the opponents to religious education into his discussion of the relationship between religion and the different disciplines I mentioned above. However, the author's philosophical and historical orientation can be overwhelming and it is at times difficult (for this reader) to follow the development of his argument. For instance, I found Gearon's separation of the *idea* of the holy from the holy less than helpful in the context of the analysis. It would be more illuminating if he used terms such as [secularizing, rationalizing, or modernizing religious, education which are still debatable among scholars and philosophers] – confusing sentence structure. Are 'secularizing,' 'rationalizing,' etc. supposed to modify 'education?'

I perceived four additional limitations of the author's approach. First, it would be very helpful if Gearon clarified, in his analysis in the different chapters, whether he was addressing religious education within public schools or in religious schools. This distinction becomes clear in the chapter about the politics of religion, and I think it is relevant to other chapters too. Second, the author relied basically, in his analysis, on a European/Western epistemology. Consequently he does not recognize the evolution of theology and religious education in non-western nations and cultures. Perhaps the separation of the idea of the holy from the holy life is unique to the history of religion in Europe and is thus not easily applicable to other societies and/or other religions. Although the author stated, from the very beginning, that he wrote from a

western perspective, this approach limits our understanding of religious education to the European and Christian contexts.

Third, the book does not include enough attention to the empirical research in the field, including how students and teachers think about religious issues, or how schools have worked to bridge the tension between the personal, social, and political purposes of religious education. In other words, reading the book allows a greater understanding of the history of ideas and the major dilemmas in the field, but not the current state of research in these areas. Finally, since the book's title includes the practice of religious education, I expected to see more explanation about the pedagogy of religious education, or how the different theories of religious education have informed the work of teachers and the curriculum they use in their schools. In other words, the book focuses on discussing the "why" and the "what" of religious education, and less on the "how." Devoting more than passing attention to the "how" and also to the practical language of religious education would make Gearon's book even more relevant to the teachers and practitioners he presumably aims to reach.

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**Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University**

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