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## Faith-Based Schools in Contexts of Religious Diversity: An Introduction

Julia Martínez-Ariño and Sara Teinturier

### ABSTRACT

In democratic societies, schools have become central sites for governing religious diversity. Research on the intersection of religion and education has focused predominantly on public secular schools but we know less about how faith-based schools operate in contexts of increasing religious diversity. How do such institutions negotiate their specific religious identity and religious educational project when religious homogeneity has given way to religious diversity, both between and within religious traditions? This introduction to the focused section provides an overview of some of the main discussions in the literature and highlights the potentials of studying faith-based schools' responses to religious diversity.

### KEYWORDS

Religious diversity;  
faith-based schools;  
pluralism; religious  
accommodation; curriculum

In democratic societies, schools have become a central site for governing religious diversity. This is, in part, due to the specific function of schools, which build a bridge between the private sphere of families and communities and the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> Although schools themselves are not a political arena *per se*, they are one of the most central sites where children learn how to become and behave as citizens, especially in plural societies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, schools are nowadays one of the institutions where diversity, and particularly religious diversity, becomes visible and crystallizes. Indeed, the crossroads of education and religion is a privileged site to study processes of secularization, institutional deconfessionalization and governance of religious diversity in liberal democracies.<sup>3</sup> The role of the school in socializing pupils in civic values, identities, and beliefs explains why so much controversy surrounds this relation.<sup>4</sup> As a result, religious education appears to be a battlefield for different kinds of struggles: One of them refers to the secularizing trends of liberal states and the resistance of certain religious groups to their loss of space in the public sphere, with

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arguments that are sometimes grounded in theological motives;<sup>5</sup> another one relates to education and the right to choose school, as the parental freedom to choose between a diversity of educational models.<sup>6</sup>

Both secular and faith-based schools have to deal with, and operate within, increasingly secular and religiously diverse contexts, as is the case of Western Europe and Canada, the geographical focus of the articles in this focused section. Yet, the particular nature of the education programs and institutional mission and identity of faith-based schools adds a different layer of complexity to the analysis. It is thus relevant to pay attention to these institutions and how they negotiate their particularities in contexts of religious diversity, understood the latter, following Beckford,<sup>7</sup> as involving various aspects: (1) an increase in the variety of religious groups in a particular context; (2) a growing presence of non-Christian religious groups; (3) the spread and popularity of the so-called “spiritual” practices and beliefs outside the so-called “world religions;” (4) the internal diversification of religious groups that were previously characterized by internal homogeneity; and (5) the religious demonopolization of countries in which one single religious tradition was dominant over the rest.

### **A Brief overview of the state of the art**

Scholarly research on the intersection of religion and education has focused predominantly on public secular schools, and in particular on (1) their education programs to teach religion or about religion, (2) their institutional responses to increasing diversity among pupils, and (3) legal, social, and political debates about religion and education.<sup>8</sup>

First, education programs dealing with religion have attracted a great deal of attention, in particular for public policies. As a result, intercultural education has been proposed as a tool to respond to religious diversity, grounded on well-documented empirical research. In Europe, the REDCo project,<sup>9</sup> led by Robert Jackson, is one of the main contributions to this field of study and has had an impact on educational recommendations in Europe.<sup>10</sup> From such a perspective, religious and nonreligious convictions are considered as cultural facts, which are part of plural and diverse societies. Promoting the “living together,” strengthening civic-mindedness and accepting differences require incorporating such social facts in the curriculum of intercultural education. A special issue of *Religion & Education* was dedicated to present the main results of this study. However, discussions around the teaching of/about religion in schools are not exclusive to Europe and examples can be found in other contexts, such as Canada,<sup>11</sup> Australia,<sup>12</sup> the United States,<sup>13</sup> and South Africa,<sup>14</sup> to name just a few examples.

Second, research has also paid attention to institutional responses to religious diversity. In their study on Canadian schools, McAndrew and colleagues<sup>15</sup> analyzed how schools in different provinces take into account the cultural and religious diversity of the school population in the functioning and rules of these institutions. In a similar way, Milot and Estivalèzes<sup>16</sup> analyzed comparatively how schools in France and Quebec address religious diversity issues. The specific role, personal background, and education of teachers has also been the focus in some studies: Subedi<sup>17</sup> argued that teacher education programs need to emphasize topics of religious diversity in the American context. Likewise, Miller and McKenna<sup>18</sup> addressed the gap in the interaction between English mainly nonpractising, Christian-heritage teachers' and mainly Muslim-heritage pupils' worldviews and beliefs. They find that whereas teachers and pupils sometimes present strong differences in personal commitment towards religion or pluralism, they also share perceptions and attitudes that are strengthened by the school environment. Everington et al.<sup>19</sup> showed that the way secondary education teachers address religious diversity issues is at the crossroads of their personal perceptions of these issues, their personal biographies, and national educational policies.

As Weisse<sup>20</sup> affirmed, "the consequence of modernity is not secularism, but pluralism." In Europe, teachers must adapt to such a reality, and this is one of the most important challenges for the years to come. The accommodation of religious symbols has attracted particular attention over the last two decades. In her study, Molokotos-Liederman<sup>21</sup> analyzed the issue of the headscarf in schools in France and the United Kingdom and found that problems are addressed differently: In France, this issue is linked to the debate on secularism and integration, whereas in the United Kingdom the debate addresses British ethnic and race relations.<sup>22</sup> In Germany, debates and legal cases on headscarves in schools draw a paradox between a society that claims openness and tolerance, and German courts and *Länder* refusing this piece of Islamic attire<sup>23</sup>.

In the American context, Whittaker et al.<sup>24</sup> compiled U.S. legal interpretations regarding issues of education and religion and suggested a variety of strategies and resources to foster religious diversity, especially developing a curriculum including religion and explanations about religious holidays and symbols. Kunzman<sup>25</sup> focused on curriculum to address religious diversity in U.S. public classrooms and to strengthen civic-mindedness. In his view, pedagogical activities (i.e., imaginative engagement such as role-plays, field experiences, and the use of art and literature) should be prioritized. Brooks<sup>26</sup> showed that in a context of ethnoreligious conflict in Mindanao (Southern Philippines), school leaders played a great role in addressing

religious diversity issues in their schools. Their personal biographies had an impact on their way of dealing with such issues.

Third, a strand of the literature has analyzed broader social and political debates about the relation between religion and education and the place and role of faith-based schools in society. Research on controversies around religion and schools has expanded in the European context, where societies are increasingly secularized, and yet religion and faith-based schools continue to play a crucial role in national education systems.<sup>27</sup> State funding of faith-based schools has been constantly publicly contested in a number of European countries. The imprint of historical majority churches on the public education system of certain countries has also been the object of analysis, particularly in countries with a long history of religious monopoly, as is the case of Italy.<sup>28</sup> In France, religious education (“enseignement des faits religieux”) in public schools provokes recurrent debates rooted in both the French history of laïcité,<sup>29</sup> and the post-2015 terrorist attacks, which has questioned the success of public schools in addressing socio-cultural diversity.<sup>30</sup> Also, issues related to social segregation and the promotion of social cohesion in post-immigrant societies and nondiscrimination based on gender and sexual identity have been much discussed in relation to faith-based schools.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as in the other two strands of research, public schools and education have received more attention than their religious counterparts. This focused section aims to contribute to the existing debates by focusing on issues in the interaction between religious schools and religious diversity.

### **Research on faith-based schools: expanding the field**

In matters of religious diversity, faith-based schools have attracted much less, and only more recent, academic attention.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the lack of studies is remarkable concerning the ways in which these institutions face religious diversity. The *International Handbooks of Religion and Education*<sup>33</sup> have mapped some of the main denominational and educational religious traditions, including faith-based schools, focusing sometimes on their presence in multicultural and plural societies.<sup>34</sup> Yet, despite lagging behind, there have been interesting contributions to a better understanding of the responses of such schools to a changing cultural and religious environment. In Canada, for example, Graham et al.<sup>35</sup> showed how faith-based schools are a usual subject of controversy, with numerous debates about public funding (in some provinces) and about their ability to inform Canadian citizenship in the context of a multicultural society. They concluded that faith-based schools are adequate to educate students as tolerant and respectful citizens. Tremblay,<sup>36</sup> based on her research on a

Muslim, a Jewish, and a Steiner school in the Greater Montreal metropolitan area, has analyzed how private faith-based schools elaborate a kind of plural citizenship and enlarge students' religious perspectives. In their analysis of Jewish schools in Montreal, Hirsch and colleagues<sup>37</sup> investigated the institutional responses of private, faith-based schools to the transformation of Quebec society in terms of secularization and diversification.

In Europe, research on these schools and their responses to diversity is also slowly expanding. Maussen and Bader<sup>38</sup> offered an overview of the situation of religious schools and tolerance in several European countries (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, and Spain), where faith-based schools are often questioned in how far the education they promote is truly tolerant. These authors show that such concerns refer mainly to issues related to immigration and immigrant religious communities, in particular Islam. Precisely, Ferrara<sup>39</sup> has studied Muslim schools in France: Based on an anthropological research conducted in three private Muslim schools, her results show that Republican values and Islamic values are taught together, allowing for the emergence of a French Muslim-civic engagement. Flint<sup>40</sup> showed that debates about Muslim schools in England question the national narrative on inclusive citizenship and identity.

Breen<sup>41</sup> demonstrated how a single-faith Catholic school, located in a multiethnic British neighborhood, adopted both religious and educational activities to promote dialog between communities. Merry<sup>42</sup> proposed an interesting argument regarding European religious schools and their popularity. According to him, schools belonging to the main Christian denominations (i.e. Catholic or Protestant) may present a pattern of institutional exclusion, as parents would choose them first for the elite education they offer. On the contrary, schools for religious minorities would be a response to issues of vulnerable minorities. Facing diversity and integration issues, both public and private (religious) schools are questioned in Denmark.<sup>43</sup> Olsen and Ahlgren suggested that private schools may face difficulties with pedagogic quality, but not with attitudes towards democracy and freedom. In the Netherlands, Versteegt and Maussen<sup>44</sup> showed that Islamic and orthodox Christian communities and schools attract negative attention of Dutch society; there is a gap between this attention and what happens in schools. Being constantly under scrutiny makes school principals, parents and students aware of, and willing to engage in, the negotiations between their religious values and the desired integration in the larger society. Conservative religious schools, more deeply attached to religious values, may face a stronger challenge to fuse with larger societal values.<sup>45</sup>

Although these studies have advanced interesting insights into how such institutions are operating amidst diverse religious environments and their own ideological projects and the challenges that this may pose, we still

know little about institutional responses to religious diversification. To expand our understanding of the ways in which faith-based schools function in the context of religious diversity, this focused section addresses the question how do faith-based schools in diverse democratic societies respond to the challenges that diversity represents. How do they negotiate their specific religious identity and religious educational project in order to accommodate religious differences? How do they address issues related to internal diversity within their own religious tradition? And what role do teachers play in these contexts? The contributions to this focused section address these and other questions.

### **Why focusing on faith-based schools?**

The main point of interest of this focused section are faith-based schools. There are several reasons that justify the interest of these institutions as objects of inquiry in relation to religious diversity. First, faith-based schools in the context of diverse societies are confronted, contrarily to what is often presumed, with considerable diversity of students. In this, they are not necessarily very different from secular schools. Pupils from different religious backgrounds attend faith-based schools of different confessions and denominations,<sup>46</sup> thereby bringing religious difference into these contexts. Furthermore, teachers may come themselves from a different religious background than that of the school. When religious homogeneity no longer characterizes these institutions, we would expect challenges emerging from the new realities.

Several legal cases have addressed the conflict between religious freedom and freedom of (private) education: May a Catholic school fire a divorced teacher, for instance, or may a religious school oblige teachers to teach religious classes if they oppose to do so?<sup>47</sup> Other challenges or controversies that may come up in such contexts are issues related to the right to claim a diverse sexual identity, which sometimes may clash with the religious doctrine of the school.<sup>48</sup>

Second, the particularities that define these institutions, such as being structured around a particular religious tradition and having a confessional approach to education, make them particularly interesting for two reasons. First, the increasing religious diversity inside faith-based schools may raise awareness of internal diversity: Religious denominations are not monolithic but to the contrary present different shades and grades of religiosity. Debates about diversity in faith-based schools can shed light on the issues at stake inside denominations themselves and help identify internal differences and discrepancies, as well as changing religious identities within one religious tradition.<sup>49</sup> Second, as schools deal with transmission and education,



examining faith-based schools opens up new opportunities to analyze what values are promoted and transmitted and how are issues of difference and diversity being dealt with.<sup>50</sup> To put it differently, the focus on such institutions allows us to better grasp how the different actors involved in faith-based schools understand notions of difference and diversity.

Third, this type of school is often depicted as a threat to social cohesion and intercultural contact. Heated public debates about the legitimacy of public funding for religious schools and their impact on social inequality by way of their recruitment practices are recurrent.<sup>51</sup> By looking at how these schools address religious diversity, we can better understand how they strengthen, or struggle with, issues of citizenship, national identity and integration.

Finally, studying these institutions allows us to look at whether and how faith-based schools accommodate religious diversity and to examine whether their strategies differ from those adopted by secular schools.<sup>52</sup> Faith-based schools seem to mobilize two main responses. The first one is an attention to strengthening both religious and intercultural education, to promote dialog between communities or values. Ultimately, they develop a kind of civic-religious education—for instance, a Muslim-civic engagement.<sup>53</sup> The second one is a kind of withdrawal, an enhancement of either religious education, or multicultural values. In such a case, faith-based schools may develop a so-called resistance to modern values; or they can secularize by weakening their religious identity.<sup>54</sup>

### **The contributions to this focused section**

This focused section results from a panel that we organized on “Faith-Based Schools Facing Diversity: Transformations, Strategies, and Resistances” at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion held in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) in July 2015. The main research question of the panel was: How do faith-based schools in religiously diverse democratic societies respond to the challenges that this diversity represents? Authors from various disciplinary backgrounds and geographical contexts (mainly Europe and Canada) presented their research dealing with burning questions on how such institutions address issues related to religious diversity. What transformations and challenges does this pluralization generate for such institutions? Do we witness an openness of these schools to other faiths (i.e., in relation to reception of students from different religious backgrounds, interfaith teaching of religion, and accommodation of religious practices) or do we, to the contrary, observe the reaffirmation of a strong religious identity as an expression of the resistance to the pluralization of society? How do families and teachers react and operate in such contexts?



A selection of four papers is included in this focused section that address some of these points. Jenny Berglund analyses comparatively how Muslim education is organized in Finland and Sweden, where Protestantism is the dominant religion. Because of historical differences, Finland and Sweden do not share the same faith-based schooling, but both provide funded religious education. For Berglund, this comparison helps understand relationships between majority and minority religions and between church, state, and society. In their study on Italy, Mariachiara Giorda and Alberta Giorgi examined the presence of religious minorities' schools in the Italian context, where Catholicism continues to be the majoritarian religious tradition. They focused especially on Islamic schools and the great diversity of the existing institutions and argue that these are mostly linked to Muslim-majority countries rather than schools equivalent to regular state schools. Jumping to the other side of the Atlantic ocean, Hirsch examined Jewish schools in Montreal and how they cater to the diverse Jewish population in the city. She showed that all schools aim at strengthening simultaneously a Montreal, Canadian, and Jewish sense of belonging, whereas the content of religious education may differ from school to school. The main challenge of the Jewish schools in her study is to make such an education relevant in today's diverse world. Finally, Stéphanie Gravel analyses the professional stance of school teachers towards neutrality in the context of Quebec. She compares teachers working in public secular and private faith-based schools and finds that their professional stance towards impartiality in teaching about religious and ethical issues does not differ in any systematic way between teachers of religious and secular schools.

With the common threat running across the articles in this focused section and the breath of topics and countries covered, we hope to contribute to moving further the discussion around faith-based schools in contexts of religious diversity. By showing the variety of issues at stake and their salience in different national contexts, we want to emphasize the relevance of including this particular type of institution in analyses of institutional responses to religious diversity.

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