

The Praeger Handbook of Religion and Education in the United States

James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, eds. *The Praeger Handbook of Religion and Education in the United States*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2009. 2 vols: 560 pp. \$150.00 Hardcover. ISBN: 9780275992279 (set).

James C. Carper is Professor of Social Foundations of Education at the University of South Carolina, where he has been a faculty member since 1989. His research interests include the history of American education, education and religion, and private schools. He has published in numerous journals, and *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (with Thomas C. Hunt) is his most recent book. Thomas C. Hunt is Professor of Education at the University of Dayton, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1996. He has authored or edited sixteen books in the last twenty-three years, all but one on religion and education.

Carper and Hunt, editors of *The Praeger Handbook of Religion and Education in the United States*, describe how many people predicted that religion would disappear from American life by the twentieth century. It has not happened. Instead, its influence has intensified. Politicians use religion for political purposes, scientists debate its possible benefits, scholars research and analyze it, journalists write about it, and “school administrators keep it at arm’s length” (xiii). Religion, in some form, is practiced by millions of Americans. Most Americans have strong feelings and opinions about religion’s relationship to education. They have vocalized these opinions since the rise of modern public education in the middle of the nineteenth century. Carper and Hunt tell us that “since that time Americans have argued vigorously about the place of religion in the government-operated schools, the right of religious students and their families, and the relationship of the state to religious schools” (xiii). These arguments, especially in recent times, have produced “more heat than light” (xiii).

The Praeger Handbook of Religion and Education in the United States is Carper and Hunt’s ninth joint effort as editors/authors of books in the field of religion and education. They offer an excellent introductory chapter on the history of religion and education in the United States. It provides a road map for the two volumes. The *Handbook* includes 175 topical entries written by more than forty scholars with national reputations, including Francis J. Beckwith, Derek H. Davis, Daniel L. Dreisbach, Charles C. Haynes, Warren A. Nord, and John Witte, Jr. The entries, which range in length from several paragraphs to several pages, are broad and provide clear overviews on a wide range of topics related to the intersection of religion and education. They are written in clear, straight-forward language that will be accessible to non-experts with an interest in the topic. The entries include cross-references as well as suggestions for further reading. This is a unique book and a useful resource for an important subject. The *Handbook* also includes a chart of the United States Supreme Court Religious Liberty decisions, beginning with 1815 and ending in 2007, with the issue, case, citation, year, ratio, author, and holding. The issues include church property, polygamy, religious school curriculum, distribution of religious literature, parent/guardian rights, school transportation, censorship, prayer and Bible reading in public schools, religious school subsidization, equal access, and religious displays, among many others. The *Handbook* includes an index and a list of the contributors with their background and published work.

There are several entries on multiple themes, e.g., “Academic Freedom,” “The Bible in Public Schools,” and “Civic Education.” The entry on the “Bible in Public Schools,” written by William Jeynes, Professor of Education at California State University in Long Beach, describes the role of the Bible in American educational history from colonial times to the present. Jeynes writes that the devotional reading of the Bible in public schools was common until the Supreme Court decisions of 1962-63 when court decisions ruled against the devotional reading of the Bible in public schools; it affirmed the academic study of the Bible and study of religion in the public schools.

There are also entries on historical events. An entry on the Scopes Trial was written by James W. Fraser, historian of American Education at New York University. Fraser points out that the trial would have a “lasting impact on American religion, textbook publishing, and the teaching of high school science for decades to come” (405). Fraser shows how after the publication of Darwin’s *The Origins of Species* most religious leaders sought to accommodate evolutionary biology with Christianity. However, there were changes that occurred in the 1920s that would make the conflict between religious leaders and evolutionary biology inevitable.

Other entries are on important court cases and Supreme Court decisions that have impacted the relationship between religion and education. *Cochran v. Louisiana State Board of Education* concerned a Louisiana law that “allowed the expenditure of state funds to purchase secular textbooks for all schoolchildren, regardless of whether the school attended was public or religious” (149). The Louisiana State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Louisiana law. The case went to the Supreme Court, which agreed with the state court, declaring that the intent of the law was to “promote an educated citizenry” (150). It was the child who benefitted, not the school. This case is considered to have created the “child benefit theory.”

The *Handbook* also includes entries on educational associations such as the American Federation of Teachers, Council for American Private Education, and National Catholic Educational Association. The entry on the National Education Association was authored by Dianne L. Moore and Mary Ellen Giess, both connected with Harvard Divinity School. The NEA was founded in 1857. It originally upheld a “Common Christianity” in its early years, but increasingly has supported a more secularized version of American democracy.

Religious schools such as Amish/Mennonite, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish are covered, as is homeschooling. The entry on “Calvinist Schools” is written by Steven C. Vryhof, a former Director of Teacher Education and now an independent researcher. He writes that Calvinist/Reformed schools have a history of over 150 years. According to Vryhof, Calvinist schools have three goals: conservation of the Christian worldview, inquiry into all aspects of life and the world, and reforming the world by living a life of discipleship responsive to God and his word” (116). Curriculum in these schools is similar to that of public schools. Calvinist schools focus on academics, not on evangelism, which is considered to be the role of the church. Reformed Christian schooling emphasizes both community support and a curriculum that affirms God’s creation.

There are also entries on advocacy groups, movements, and special projects. An entry on “Common Ground Documents” is authored by Charles C. Haynes, a Senior Scholar at the Freedom Forum’s First Amendment Center in Washington, D.C. These documents “are a series of agreements reached since the late 1980s by coalitions of civil liberties, religious, and educational groups on the constitutional role of religion in the public schools” (154). The significant point of these documents is that they find common ground among groups that are often at war with one another. The documents provide guidance to parents, educators, and students on a “variety of ways in which students may express their faith under the First Amendment and teachers may teach about religion in the classroom” (155).

One last entry that is worth mentioning is “First Amendment Religion Clauses and the Supreme Court” by John Witte, Jr., the Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law at Emory University in Atlanta. This well-written entry supplements the introductory essay written by the editors and provides an excellent overview of the First Amendment and the Supreme Court decisions that have impacted its interpretation. Witte notes that about a third of the 200 Supreme Court cases on religious liberty concerned religion and education. He states that these cases raise three questions: “What role may religion play in public education? What role may government play in religious education? And what constitutional rights do private citizens—parents and students especially—have in public schools?” (205) Witte thinks these decisions have worked out a rough outline of an answer to these questions which have been “refined and extended” (205) by the lower courts.

The Praeger Handbook of Religion and Education is an excellent resource, well written by authors with excellent credentials. The broad, objective entries cover topics on all sides of the spectrum with little evidence of bias. All the entries together present a thorough overview of the important issues related to religion and education. This handbook will be helpful to undergraduate students, educators, parents, and the general public interested in the topic. It is highly recommended for academic, theological, and public libraries.

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