Teaching virtue: the contribution of religious education, edited by Marius Felderhof and Penny Thompson, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, 227 pp., £22.99 (paperback; also available as hardback and as PDFeBook) ISBN 978-1-4725-2253-5 (Pbk)

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This is a book of great promise and mixed results. It rests on the ambitions of the 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for RE but its outcomes do not really match up to these.

Conceptually, it is well organised. Part One, Orientations, comprises four chapters setting out the theoretical orientations to support a positive association between Religious and Moral Education. Part Two, Dispositions, provides individual reflections on eight of the 24 'dispositions' (listed 23) which the Syllabus identifies as common concerns agreed by the leaders of the faith communities which make up the rich diversity of the City of Birmingham's population. These are being: honest, compassionate, just, courageous, hopeful, temperate, wise and faithful. Part Three, Exemplars, is a compilation of curriculum suggestions based on this theme. There is also an Appendix which outlines a Birmingham RE Survey for reviewing the impact of RE in schools.

The actual content is however variable. The first orientation chapter is provided by Felderhof. There, as in his introduction to the book, he draws attention to the dangers of RE becoming preoccupied with institutional religious forms at the expense of the beliefs and values which intrinsically motivate them. He stresses the properly future orientation of RE; as with religions themselves the emphasis should be on what lies ahead in living a life for which RE is a contributory preparation. He rightly states that exposure to the imperative demands which call for deep and lasting transformation in living is vital in a public education which affirms 'the moral and spiritual development of individuals and of society' (23). It is disappointing to see this coupled with his repeated judgement that 'most RE in Britain today encourages one to teach "about religions and secular philosophies"' (2) and that it is "spectatorialist" and "voyeurist" (21). Any acknowledgement of the equally weighted emphasis on learning from religion and belief as found in virtually all other agreed syllabuses and the National Framework for RE is entirely missing, as though Birmingham alone is different in having consequential and prospective priorities.

Philip Barnes's orientation chapter makes a strong claim that moral education suffered an untimely death at the hands of the fad of phenomenological RE but is promised its urgently needed rebirth in the new Birmingham approach. There is certainly some truth in pointing to the separate tracks that RE and ME were set on in the 1970s, but their fundamental complementarity in the thinking of Loukes and Smart is evident in those writings of which the author seems not to be aware. He rightly draws attention to the need for the distinction to be made between the language of what is legal and rights based, what is good in its own accord and what may be termed religiously virtuous. What is against the law, what is morally bad and what is sinful may overlap but they are not necessarily the same. But these distinctions will properly be remarked in any responsible approach to either ME or RE, separately or together. Their absence is not a characteristic of the agreed syllabus RE of the last 40 years; even if it were, other agreed syllabuses and the National Framework cannot be held responsible for failures on this front, for to claim so overestimates their significance across the whole curriculum in many schools. Even sillier is the claim that 'high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and criminal and anti-social

behaviour' along with 'mental health problems, depression and suicide among the young' might be evidence of the 'largely ineffective and conceptually flawed policies' (65) which he associates with RE professionals.

The other two orientation chapters extend the main emphasis of the book and are less tendentious. David Carr, the moral philosopher, expounds the nature of virtue ethics. He prefaces this by defining RE as having two components: one is the development of critical knowledge of 'the past and present beliefs and practices of religious groups or cultures' and the other 'a more personally formative educational function'. He distinguishes the latter from a 'confessional' function which he says is 'no longer defensible' (43).

The promotion of moral character traits does not intrude on private personality; this is not attempting conversion but encouragement to honesty, self-control, fairness and compassion – non-contentious moral views. Such moral views are central to the tradition of virtue ethics, the development of which he associates principally with Aristotle and a range of contemporary exponents. With or without the direct association of Greek cardinal virtues with the Christian theological virtues, Carr sees them both as contributing to the development of practical wisdom which is fundamental to good education.

Brenda Watson confirms that the combination of beliefs and values will be part of a responsible RE and therefore a corrective to the dangers of a 'Value Free' society. She laments a popular tendency towards relativism – cultural, moral and religious, as also positivism, secularism and the fact – belief divide. An effective response in RE will be to focus more on experience of transcendence, and to reopen the educational grounds for 'assemblies' as occasions for open exposure to different affirmations of such. Instrumental arguments for RE if reduced to some political coherence agenda deserve to be exposed as presumptionist.

The chapters on each of eight dispositions are of variable strength. In most, there is protracted Christian theological reflection (Garner on Compassion, Thompson on Hope, Felderhof on Temperance), some are more expressly philosophical (Lloyd on Courage, Houston on Wisdom) or more attentive to moral development and learning (so Watson on Honesty, Kay on Justice) and Astley alone engages with all three – philosophy, theology and development. The surprise however is how little attention is given to religious resources beyond the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This absence is in part offset by the Foreword to the book being written by Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh from a Birmingham Gurdwara, and by the several stories from the Sikh tradition which are included in the useful material on Exemplars of particular virtues in Part Three. But the opportunity to draw more extensively from what is called the 'treasury of religious faith' is strangely missed. Ironically, the very feature which enthusiasts for the English and Welsh RE tradition boast to international colleagues – that it defers to local collaboration between teachers and scholars, 'principal' faith community representatives and politicians – is missing from this Birmingham celebration.

Any absence of attention to virtues in the school's curriculum may in part be laid at the door of some interpretations of RE, but their influence is minimal as is even that of agreed syllabuses (apparently so in the survey Appendix and the cited research of Parker and Freathy (69)). A far better explanation lies in the quality and quantity of attention given to both RE and ME in teacher education in contrast with the prevailing uncertainties in society at large in regard to fundamental beliefs – to which pupils and teachers generally are daily exposed. There's also the matter of the separate nurture provision within the faith communities themselves for which public education can never claim to be a substitute. Certainly, learning about and from religion along with the virtues prized within deserves priority in any good education.