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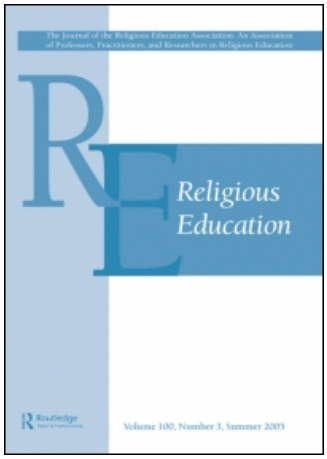

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RESEARCH IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: CONTENT AND METHODS FOR THE POSTMODERN AND GLOBAL ERA

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CONTENT ISSUES IN A GLOBAL AND POSTMODERN ERA

Two major trends may be said to define and preoccupy the current generation: globalization and post-modernism. These interrelated phenomenon touch on all facets of life. Religious education is no exception. Empirical studies with theoretical bases allowing for comparability are needed regarding the current values, beliefs, behaviors, and knowledge of students, teachers, and parents. This article briefly outlines directions for such research in terms of both content and methodology. Because my field of expertise is in Jewish studies, many of the examples cited refer to Jewish education, but the principles outlined and issues raised apply equally to other streams of religious education.

Universal versus Specific Beliefs and Values

The emergence of a global culture espousing tolerance, moral relativism, and multiculturalism has been accompanied by a parallel resurgence of traditional and fundamentalist movements advocating a return to specific ethnic, national, and religious values. These two worldviews represent the extreme endpoints of a spectrum along which various populations may be ranged. This "spectrum" is not linear, but multidimensional and a given population may hold traditional views on some issues and liberal views on others. What is the place of postmodern thought in religious education? How is religious education adapting to post-modernism and/or reacting against it?

One task for researchers will be to examine how universal versus specific values are transmitted in various educational settings. Settings surveyed should include traditional/fundamentalist schools as well as progressive, liberal ones. Because co-religionists are spread around

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the world, international comparisons are particularly important. Research on Jewish education has indicated the importance of the larger social context (Cohen 2004; Cohen and Horenczyk 1999). Comparable international studies conducted among students of other religions would verify and enrich this finding.

In addition to the country in which religious education takes place, another important difference exists between formal and informal settings. According to sociologist Reuven Kahane (1997), informality will play an increasing role in the post-modern era. Informal religious education (youth movements, summer camps, etc.) generally stresses instilling in participants a sense of "identity" and a system of values. What values are transmitted in informal religious educational settings? Do they differ from those taught in formal settings? How do students who attend public schools and religious after-school activities reconcile conflicting messages (particularly those who are members of a religious minority)? For example, in a study of Jewish youth who attend public schools in Texas and a Jewish summer camp, we found that the creation of a temporary community at the camp was important in allowing participants to formulate specifically Jewish identities, while avoidance of religious discussions enabled them to maintain friendships with their Christian peers at school (Cohen and Bar Shalom 2006).

Religious Education in an Age of Mobility

The era of globalization has seen an unprecedented increase in movement of people, within and across national borders. This has a number of implications for religious education, including: (1) the proliferation of "diaspora" communities; (2) the dispersion of religiously homogenous communities; and (3) increased religious tourism. These three phenomena are intertwined in the field of religious education. Religious education once took place primarily in strong local communities with limited interaction across religious boundaries and limited movement across national boundaries.

The Proliferation of "Diaspora" Communities. Today, many millions of people are practicing their religion and traditions in new social contexts while maintaining ties to a "homeland." Religious schools may encourage or discourage their students' assimilation into the surrounding culture. An historical survey of Jewish education around the world (Cohen and Cohen 2000) found examples of Jewish schools (particularly in the U.S. and France) in which the successful acculturation

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of migrant students was one of the primary objectives, as well as examples of schools in ultra-orthodox communities that attempted to insulate their students from the surrounding society. The Berry model of strategies of acculturation (Berry 1990, 1997) may provide a theoretical model for the study of how religious schools of migrant populations educate students toward assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization.

Intertwined with attitudes toward the new home country are attitudes regarding the "homeland." Is the host country seen as a new home, and the Old Country a place to visit and remember in stories, or is the host country seen as a temporary exile until return home is possible? Analysis of responses to a list of items related to Israel by participants in young Jewish tourists to Israel from many Diaspora countries revealed dramatic differences in perceptions of the "Jewish homeland" that reflect ideological differences in the educational systems of various Diaspora countries (Cohen 2003a). For American Jews, Israel is presented as a pilgrimage site, whereas for others it is a refuge from danger or a potential home. Parallel research of other diaspora populations may explore how branches of schools of the same religion operating in different settings present interaction with the host society and relationship with a "homeland."

Syncretism and the Dispersion of Religiously Homogenous Communities. The impact of domestic migration is no less dramatic than that of international migration. The general and widespread dissolution of community and family networks in Western society presents a major change and challenge to religious education. Whereas once the primary transmission of basic values and beliefs took place in the home and community, this task has now become the responsibility of educational institutions. How effectively are institutions able to carry out this task? Who sets the agenda and how are they held accountable to the community they serve?

Other aspects of domestic migration include the increased interaction between people of different religions and the resultant syncretism. How do religious schools answer children's questions about other religions, particularly when the child has friends and even close family members of other religions? How is the issue of intermarriage addressed? One response to the reality of multicultural communities has been an emphasis on universal values in religious education (Ashton 2000; Nelson and Richardson 2004). Another response is the hybridization of religious tradition in multireligious families and communities. A

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backlash can be seen in the resurgence of sectarian and fundamentalist education. What is the scope and impact of each?

Increased Religious Tourism. The increased mobility that presents religious education with the difficulties outlined earlier also offers a new opportunity: easier travel to holy sites and the growth of religious tourism. In a chapter on religious tourism as an education act (Cohen 2006) I trace how pilgrimage has become a component of wider religious educational curricula. How are educational pilgrimages being included in religious educational programs, particularly in light of the dispersion from spiritual centers though domestic or international migration? How effective are visits to holy sites in enhancing meaningful religious identities?

METHODOLOGICAL DIRECTIONS

The challenges of addressing the complex content issues outlined earlier require multiple research tools and solid theoretical bases for studies. My experience in the field has led me to adopt two basic directions in research methods: (1) Facet Theory as a means of defining the theoretical basis of a study and empirically testing it and (2) a combination of qualitative and quantitative research tools in collecting data.

Facet Theory

Many empirical studies suffer from lack of a solid theoretical basis. Facet Theory, developed by Louis Guttman, is a way to organize analyses of multidimensional, multifaceted systems (for a comprehensive bibliography of Facet Theory see Cohen 2003b). It includes a system for defining the theory of a study, tools for uncovering the underlying structure of collected data, and guidelines for rationalizing the correspondence between the theory and the structure of the data. It is beyond the scope of this brief article to explain Facet Theory, but the literature on it is rich and numerous empirical studies have successfully used this approach and its relevant analytic techniques. The point here is not to champion one particular school, but rather to stress the need for empirical studies to be guided by well-defined theoretical bases.

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Too often, qualitative and quantitative research methods have been perceived as opposites in a dichotomy. Each has its own strengths,

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and in combination they can yield results that would not be obvious if only one type of method were used (Newman and Benz 1998). Qualitative methods are particularly useful in generating theories. They can sometimes reveal gaps in the researcher's perception, as noted by Hemmings (2004, 111): "I did not originally intend to conduct in-depth explorations of how graduating seniors came of age in the religious domain. . . . I changed my mind and research design when it became clear that religion loomed large in the lives of graduating seniors."

Quantitative methods are well suited to theory testing. Once the parameters of the study are determined, large amounts of quantitative data can be collected. Multidimensional data analysis techniques made possible by powerful computer programs enable the researchers to investigate numerous variables for many subjects from a variety of angles and to uncover basic organizing principles of the data. These organizing principles can then be understood in the human context provided through qualitative methods of interviews and observations. For example, the study of a Jewish summer camp in Texas combined qualitative and quantitative methods that yielded a fuller understanding of the type of religious education participants received than would have been possible had only interviews or only questionnaires been considered.

The turn of the millennia is an exciting time for research in the field of religious education. The issues are at the forefront of many of the most pressing political and social issues. The need for understanding how various streams of religious education are responding to a changing world is critical. Empirical research that starts with well-defined theoretical bases and combines a variety of research methods and analytic tools can further our cumulative understanding of the issues facing religious education in the global and post-modern era.

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