

Review: Dinham, A & Francis, M (eds) (2015), *Religious literacy in policy and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.

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Globalization, migration, and an increasingly complex connection between nation and culture, have prompted a renewed recognition of religion as a major social, political, and cultural force. For Europeans, this has come as both a shock and a challenge in the face of long-held assumptions about the unimpeded forward march of secularization. As the political significance of religion in Britain becomes apparent, however, the public understanding of religion is troublingly deficient, and in this edited volume, is characterized as a form of *illiteracy*, with all of the disadvantages and vulnerabilities implied.

Literacy as a term was invented at the end of the nineteenth century 'to express the achievement and possession of what were increasingly seen as general and necessary skills' pertaining to reading and writing¹. Its modern extension to imply some kind of functional understanding of almost anything is, consequently, fraught with danger. As semiotician Gunter Kress has warned, 'the more that is gathered up in the meaning of the term, the less meaning it has'². *Religious literacy in policy and practice* illustrates the problem. The nineteen contributors to this volume represent a broad range of ideas about what religious literacy may be supposed to be. Editors Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis do a sterling job in steering a coherent path through this problem in their opening and closing chapters. But perhaps the most satisfactory attempt at a succinct definition is in

¹ Williams, R. 1976. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana, p. 188.

² Kress, G. 2003. *Literacy in the new media age*. Oxford: Routledge, p. 22.

James C. Conroy's insightful and highly critical account of school Religious Education, in which he describes religious literacy as an engagement with religious language, and religious concepts and practices, that embody 'the capacity to locate particular ideas within their historical, ethical, epistemological and social context'. (p.169)

Despite the slipperiness of the notion of religious literacy, the literacy metaphor remains a useful one, implying more than simply factual knowledge about religion, but rather conversance, and the recognition that religious ideas and practices are situated. Literacy requires an understanding of broader contexts, and this is the point. As Dinham and Francis admit in their opening chapter: "religious literacy" is not a perfect term, but it is the best we have found for our purposes' (p.12).

The book is divided into three sections: theory, policy, and practice. A foreward by sociologist, Grace Davie, provides a helpful overview of the current religious situation in the UK and Europe. Diane L. Moore's analytical framework (Chapter 2) is also contextually useful. Most contributions are UK-focused (although there is both an Australian and American perspective included). Some chapters are based on empirical research, whilst others are more anecdotal. Clearly, this is an area that requires greater systematic research. But the book is timely, and provides a solid introduction to the field. It should be of interest, not only to scholars and policy-makers, but also to anyone concerned about the poverty of current public discourse about religion.