

Book Review of Russell Sandberg, *Religion in Schools: Learning Lessons from Wales*. Anthem Press, 2022," *Journal of Church & State* 65 (2023): 474-475

Abstract

A review of a book that describes and defends the bold new experiment in law, religion, and education afoot in Welsh schools, featuring greater religious pluralization and less Anglican establishment.

Keywords: Wales, school, religious pluralism, Anglican establishment

Religion in Schools: Learning Lessons from Wales. By Russell Sandberg. London: Anthem Press, 2022, 118 pp., \$24.95

In this lean, learned, and lithe volume, leading Cardiff law professor and Welsh parliamentary advisor Russell Sandberg introduces the bold new experiment in law, religion, and education afoot in Wales. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, which Sandberg helped to shape, "provides the biggest change that schools in Wales will have seen for decades" (93).

The new Act transforms the teaching of religion for Welsh students aged three to sixteen. It rejects a centuries-old tradition of exclusively Christian (and often Anglican) instruction, which both England and Wales had reaffirmed and in fact strengthened in several statutes from 1944 to 1988 (5-46). In its place, the new Act mandates a more pluralistic education in "religion, values, and ethics" (RVE) (93-106). Every state school and every state "maintained" school in Wales, including many faith-based private schools, must now offer timely RVE instruction to their students, with some modest opt outs permitted. The curriculum, per Section 61 of the new Act: "(a) must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Wales are mainly Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Wales, and (b) must also reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Wales." These reforms are part and product of a sweeping effort to modernize Welsh education and to ensure that all Welsh students learn about various authentic religious and non-religious worldviews – even while allowing faith-based schools to continue to give preference to their distinct religious teachings and practices.

The new Act was controversial and complicated in its making, Sandberg shows (53-92), and, inevitably, to gain passage became larded with a number of highly particularized regulations for the sundry types of lower schools in Wales (93-107). Despite his own ample efforts among others to press for more sweeping and systematic changes (83-93), the new Welsh Act is "not quite bold enough," Sandberg argues (2). It still cedes too much power to local education committees to trim and tailor RVE

instruction without having a common core curriculum. It also “leaves untouched the law on religious worship [in schools], which is as outdated as the old law on religious education if not more so” (2, 107-10). Nonetheless, this new Welsh Act is “a law on religion in schools that is modern, clear and equal” (2-3).

Sandberg praises this new Welsh Act as a long overdue educational reform of “an antiquated legal framework that is no longer fit for purpose in the twenty-first century” (53). He also thinks it accords better with European human rights standards that protect all forms of “thought, conscience, and belief” – whether theistic or non-theistic, traditional or modern, communal or individual (2, 47-50). Sandberg urges England to enact comparable pluralistic reforms for education as well as for family law and perhaps other areas of law long grounded in state-established Christian values that no longer speak to the hearts or manners of many Britons (xii). He sees these legal reforms as corrective “modernization” and “pluralization,” not necessarily “secularization” (xiii, 6, 13, 60-61).

American readers, accustomed to a sharper division between public schools and private schools in their treatment of religion, might well think the new Welsh law allows too much religious instruction in state schools and too much state intrusion in religious schools. Critics and champions of established Anglicanism might well wonder whether these celebrated “radical” reforms (xi, 1, 51-60, 73, 93, 110) in Welsh education law will trigger comparable educational reforms elsewhere in the British Isles and Commonwealth – let alone radical reforms of other areas of law with creaky Christian foundations. Parents and teachers might well wonder whether school-age children might do better if habituated in one or two sturdy systems of belief and practice before making reasoned choices as adults in an open marketplace of religious and non-religious ideas. Even so, in a day of political tribalism and religious antagonism in so many parts of the world, the Welsh experiment in educational reform bears close watching.

Religion in Schools is the inaugural volume in the new Anthem Studies in Law Reform book series, which Professor Sandberg established in an effort “to bridge the gap between legal activism and academic scholarship” (xi). It sets the series bar very high indeed in the quality of its writing, the depth of its research, and the acuity of its analysis.

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