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EDITORIAL

Diversity of Religion and Belief in Education: inequality, citizenship and belonging

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Introduction

Religion and belief remain a key focus of sociological inquiry, given that 76% of the world's population in 2020 identified with a religion and 24% were religiously unaffiliated (Hackett et al. 2025). Globalisation and increasing human mobilities have contributed to the rise of religious plurality across multiple countries, particularly in the Global North. Beaman (2022) notes that many Western liberal democracies are experiencing significant religious change, marked by declining institutional religious engagement, decreasing levels – but diversifying forms – of Christianity, rising numbers of those identifying as non-religious, and growing non-Christian religious affiliations. The UK, which features to varying degrees in over half of the articles in this Special Issue, acts as a good example of these wider trends. According to the 2021 Census of England and Wales, the share of people identifying as Christian declined from 59% in 2011 to 46% in 2021. Over the same period, the proportion of the population reporting no religion increased from 25% to 37%, while those identifying with other faiths grew from 8% to 11% (ONS 2022).

Growing diversity of religion and belief is not only confined to the Global North, however, with other countries included in this Special Issue also experiencing religious change. For example in Brazil, the Global Attitudes Survey shows that between 2013/14 and 2024, the proportion of Catholics declined from 61% to 46%, while Protestants increased from 26% to 29% and those identifying as non-religious grew from 8% to 15% (Lesage et al. 2026). Singapore has recently been identified as the most religiously diverse country in the world as of 2020, comprising 31% Buddhist, 20% religiously unaffiliated, 19% Christian, 16% Muslim, 5% Hindu and 9% all other religions (Tong 2026). These changing landscapes of religion and belief present a range of challenges for governments across the world, such as how to adequately respond to diverse religious and non-religious needs within public service provision (Modood and Sealy 2024). Education is no exception, with many schools, colleges and universities in the Global North and beyond now catering for a broader range of faiths and beliefs among students and stakeholders (e.g. Brøndum 2026 on Denmark, this Special Issue).

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[1] affirms that ‘everyone has the right to education’ and ‘it shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among [...] religious groups’. The declaration also states that individuals have the right to freedom of religion (Article 18) and freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion (Article 2). These sentiments are reflected in other supranational agreements such as the European Convention on Human Rights[2] and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights[3]. Implementing these principles in educational contexts requires careful consideration of how best to recognise and accommodate different faith and belief groups, and to balance competing rights, interests and obligations. How these challenges are addressed by policy makers, education providers and individual practitioners can have profound effects on different groups’ educational experiences and influence the extent to which they face inequalities based on religion or belief (Hemming and Hailwood 2020).

Sociology offers critical insights into these educational processes, from the everyday micro-dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and their consequences for identity, agency and belonging (e.g. Strhan et al.

2025, this Special Issue) to large-scale patterns of inequality and discrimination and their implications for citizenship, community relations and social justice (e.g. Beider 2025, this Special Issue). Sociological perspectives also help to contextualise these mechanisms within broader cultural trends, including rising nationalism, racialisation and social division, where values and beliefs have become sites of contestation (Fortier 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006), and where the dynamics of citizenship and belonging are shaped by a tense climate of misinformation propagated across digital and other forms of media (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018).

Sociology of education has, however, been relatively slow to engage with questions of religion and belief as primary social divisions, more often framing them through an intersectional lens via other axes of inequality such as race, ethnicity and social class (e.g. Allen and West 2011; Shah, Dwyer, and Modood 2010). Notwithstanding important overlaps between these strands on issues such as the role of racialisation in shaping religious discrimination, and the classed dynamics of faith-based schooling, there are also important sociological questions that require a more direct focus on religion and belief in education. In recent years, there has been an emerging body of research that has begun to grapple with such questions, examining specific educational contexts (e.g. Hemming 2015; Hickey-Moody 2023; Keddie 2014; Kitching 2020) or certain faith or belief groups (e.g. Abbas 2018; Samson 2020; Strhan and Shillitoe 2025), but this work has not yet reached critical mass.

This Special Issue aims to address this gap by bringing together a set of original research articles that take religion and belief as their main point of interest, interrogating its varied relationship with education through the lens of inequality, citizenship and belonging. The collection includes methodologically and theoretically diverse contributions focusing on varied phases of, and types of education, as well as featuring a range of religion/belief groups and contexts from around the world. Beyond its contributions to sociology of education and of religion, our aim in this Special Issue is also to highlight the importance of taking the intersections of religion and education seriously in wider debates about citizenship, belonging, migration, and social justice.

Article summaries

Lefebvre and colleagues provide an insightful comparison between Religious Education (RE) as a curriculum subject in Brazil, Canada (including Ontario and Quebec) and England, and how it has evolved to address diversity of religion and belief. Drawing on a thick description of historical and contemporary policy developments, as well as empirical data from RE practitioners, they trace how specific national contexts can shape the ways that religious diversity is managed in educational fields. Central to this endeavour is the careful balancing of the pursuit of pluralism and inclusivity, with entrenched religious influences and the desire to strengthen cohesive national identities.

Aune and colleagues examine university students' experiences of religion- or belief-related equality in relation to the Equality Act 2010. Using survey data from over 4600 students across 133 UK universities, they find uneven experiences of harassment, marginalisation, and institutional recognition that vary by religious group and university type, suggesting weak and inconsistent implementation of Equality Act duties. Their research demonstrates the need to go beyond diversity-friendly inclusive language when treating religion or belief as a protected characteristic and pay attention to the complex policy environment and the university type, which both shape how institutions translate legislation into everyday practice.

In their examination of the public funding of religious schools, Fontdevila and Vanderhoven explore the fraught logics and contested debates surrounding publicly funded religious schools in Western contexts. Drawing on an expansive, interdisciplinary 'state of the art', the article addresses polarised claims that such schools either recognise religious diversity in multi-faith societies or, conversely, undermine social inclusion and educational autonomy. Highlighting the absence of a sociological lens and the limited level of empirical inquiry in these debates, the authors foreground the dynamic and

nuanced social consequences of faith-based schools and the implications of these complexities for education policy.

Bratsvedal provides insight into Norwegian kindergartens and whether and how 'critical multicultural pedagogy' (CMP) can be used as a tool to help support work in religiously diverse settings. Exploring the Ethics, Religion, and Philosophy section of Norway's Framework Plan for Kindergartens, Bratsvedal considers how CMP aligns with this, and with staff intentions and practices. Bratsvedal's article reveals a tension between policy and practice related to the Framework Plan, as well as between what staff at kindergartens intend to do in relation to religious diversity, and how this plays out in pedagogical practice.

Strhan and colleagues explore the interrelations between religion and citizenship, through a focus on children's everyday affective experiences and responses to Religious Education (RE) and collective worship (assemblies), drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from two English primary schools. They found that pupils expressed and enacted subtle critiques of education policy and its continued privileging of Christianity. This was evident in one school via a sense of injustice at the relative lack of attention to diverse religious/non-religious beliefs and identities, and in the other, through emotions of boredom and lack of interest in the positioning of religion as a taken-for-granted cultural norm.

The relationship between pupils' agency and religion is an ongoing theme in debates about religion and education, and is also central to Hobson's article. Drawing on an original analysis of the websites of nationally representative samples of English state schools, Hobson focuses on how they present religious education, collective worship, values education, and faith-related admissions criteria. The article reveals that while ideals of agency underpin how schools present their engagements with religion, pupils' religious freedoms were not consistently prioritized. This complicates sociological arguments about the individualization of religion in Britain, showing how religious agency is negotiated within and constrained by wider relationships.

In their article, Shaw and Stones raise pressing questions about the English secondary school curriculum nexus – or lack of one – between Religious Education and Citizenship Education. They problematise the educational neglect of the 'potentially generative space' between more expansive plural religion/worldview and lived citizenship perspectives. Drawing on an empirical project, the authors explore how Lego-based methodology with young people provided creative sites of co-produced knowledge and praxis. They showcase how intersections and 'interplay' between religion and citizenship, brought to life through innovative methods and data, segue into wider questions of civic identity, belonging and participation, and argue compellingly for connective curriculum (re)development.

Grimley and colleagues take religious festivals as a focal point for their study on international schools in Singapore and their role in forging more-than-Indian citizenship pathways for students of Indian ethnicity. The authors present interview data from students, teachers and administrators in diverse 'traditional' and 'ethnically affiliated' international schools, to show how the two school types were involved in shaping different versions of more-than-Indian identities. Celebration of Hindu and other religio-cultural festivals played in important role in differentiating Indian students from other groups, as well as strengthening the development of students' global and cosmopolitan outlooks, alongside a sense of collective Indian identity.

Drawing on data from the 2018 EU Fundamental Rights Agency survey across 12 European countries, Beider explores why Jewish parents choose to send their children to Jewish faith schools or alternative options. On the one hand, parents want their children to be in school environments that foster belonging, religious teaching and integration, but on the other, they wish to expose children to more diversity, forge ties beyond their faith community and protect against marginalisation. The article explores the tension between these two positions, along with the potential discrimination and safety concerns that may come with either of these choices.

Brøndum examines how students with minoritised religious and ethnic backgrounds navigate further and higher education in Denmark, shaped by their experiences of othering across primary, secondary, and ongoing educational trajectories. Through 41 narrative interviews with Muslim students, Brøndum finds participants tend to downplay their religious markers and adopt withdrawal and code-switching strategies to manage their sense of belonging, resulting in distinct social orientations and, in some cases, further marginalisation. These lived experiences illustrate how seeking recognition within the Danish educational context requires already minoritised students' significant affective labour at the intersection of religion, race and power.

Rasmussen and Graefenstein's article explores the different ways in which Muslim and Christian parents' protests about the introduction of Statutory Relationships and Sex Education in English primary schools were portrayed in the media. Their analysis highlights the importance of understanding both how Muslim communities are 'spectacularized' in these debates and how 'whiteness' and Christianity become 'invisibilized'. This becomes evident in media reporting which focused on Muslim protestors, portraying them as anti-nationalist and out-of-step with British values, while Christians who protested were not securitized and their right to protest was defended.

Overall contributions

This Special Issue makes several significant contributions to the sociological study of diversity of religion and belief in education. Firstly, it highlights the importance of an international comparative approach for illuminating sociological processes across different national contexts, revealing how convergent global forces interact with divergent local circumstances. For example, Lefebvre and colleagues demonstrate how similar imperatives to provide for growing diversity of religion and belief through RE curricula can result in varying approaches shaped by local historical and contemporary policy contexts, leading to different outcomes for inequality, citizenship and belonging. Likewise,

Fontdevila and Vanderhoven show how parallel debates over publicly funded religious schools can translate into distinct and unequal effects across national contexts, depending on the status of different religious groups, the arrangements for school governance, and the varying character of faith schools. These cases and the insights garnered from them illustrate the need for more studies of this kind to achieve a broader, international perspective on the issues.

Secondly, examining religion and belief across multiple types and phases of education offers valuable insights. The collection demonstrates that investigating a range of settings can help build a more comprehensive picture of how religion and belief intersect with educational inequality, citizenship and belonging. For example, the articles by Bratsvedal, Grimley and colleagues, and Aune and colleagues show how religious festivals can feature in different ways across educational phases. While the main concern in the early years setting was about how practitioners could approach discussions of religious holidays inclusively, in the school context, festivals played an important role in the construction of student and institutional identities. In contrast, the focus in the university setting was on accommodating individual student needs relating to religious observances. Collectively these studies reveal how religious/non-religious belonging in education is shaped by a combination of intersecting factors such as institutional policies, educator approaches and student agency. Future research could expand this focus to other modes of education, such as informal, non-formal, lifelong and workplace learning to further explicate these processes.

Finally, the collection underscores the diversity of educational practices and arrangements in which religion and belief play a role, from policy to attainment, institutional character to curriculum representation, religious festivals to interfaith relations. For example, Hobson highlights how collective worship and school values often feature elements of religion and belief, and are presented in ways that can illuminate the power relations between pupil autonomy and institutional authority. Shaw and Stones consider how areas of the curriculum such as RE, which are explicitly concerned with religion and belief, may intersect with other subjects such as Citizenship Education, which foreground rights,

responsibilities and belonging. Furthermore, Rasmussen and Graefenstein show how relationships between schools and parents can be structured through inequalities of religion and belief, with certain groups enjoying more influence than others. Overall, this Special Issue opens up new insight into many aspects of religion and belief in education while leaving substantial scope for future research on other important roles and themes.

Notes

1. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
2. https://www.echr.coe.int/european-convention-on-human-rights
3. https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights

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