

## Book Review

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**Dennis Brown**, *Religious Studies for GCSE: Philosophy and Ethics Applied to Christianity, Roman Catholicism and Islam*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, pp. xv + 302, ISBN: 978-1509504374 (pbk).

In *Religious Studies for GCSE: Philosophy and Ethics Applied to Christianity, Roman Catholicism and Islam*, Dennis Brown presents a broad range of religious studies materials substantially taken from Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic, and Islamic standpoints. Even though this textbook is, put simply, for those who want to complete the GCSE secondary school course in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the materials discussed seem to have been planned and elaborated with a view to promoting particular approaches. The contents are organised by topic, with each topic then compared across different religious perspectives. The application of these ethical and philosophical approaches to the content of the religions is one of the most interesting points of this book, and the significance of certain details in how the arguments are shaped will be examined below.

For those learning about religion, this book can help them to choose thematic approaches, which have developed in the twenty-first century as one of the curricula mainstays of the three religious groups. For example, in their volume in *Meeting Standards Through Integrated Curriculum* (2004), Susan M. Drake and Rebecca C. Burns demonstrate how this type of integrated, thematic curriculum has become a standard curriculum model for many schools in both developed and developing countries. Brown's textbook covers topics categorised as foundational issues, such as religious text authority (Chapter 1), the existence and the nature of God (Chapters 2 and 3), revelation and religious experience (Chapter 4), the problem of evil (Chapter 5), death and life after death (Chapter 7); and those that can be considered ethical discourses, consisting of religion and science (Chapter 6), human nature (Chapter 8), relationships and families (Chapter 9), religion, human rights and social justice (Chapter 10), global relationships (Chapter 11), war and peace (Chapter 12), and crime and punishment (Chapter 13). The themes recommended for completion of the GCSE course are all covered and there is additional discussion about religious authority (p. x). Brown usefully includes further explanation of a variety of religious references for each belief system. The topics described above are commonly offered when studying religion in schools, ranging from simple to complex discourses according to student learning levels. This book, as indicated by the title, generally presents relatively in-depth, philosophical approaches, which need critical understandings.

Brown is generally successful in making comparison between the three religious groups. At the beginning of Chapter 1, for instance, he presents the various authority bases in Protestant Christianity and then Roman Catholicism, consisting of the pivotal place of the Bible, Jesus, the apostles, religious experiences, traditions, religious leaders, natural law, and conscience. The next section is about Islamic perspectives, consisting of the Quran, the Sunnah (tradition), religious experience, and *fiqh*, or law (pp. 2-25). In

elaborating diverse interpretation of the Bible, Brown discusses at least four different approaches to the Bible: literalist, fundamentalist, conservative, and liberal (p. 8). In contrast, he does not provide the same various paradigms of Quranic interpretation, or even elaborate on the typical interpretation of the Quran, for instance, as William Shepard does in *Introducing Islam* (2009), basing its interpretation on the Sunnah (transmission) and 'rational opinion' (p. 66). Another interesting way of comparing the ideas in this book is that each philosophy representing either Christianity or Islam is also moderated as well as criticised by so-called 'third way' opinions. For example, in proving the existence of God, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam all use 'argument from design', claiming that this world is an orderly system that signals the presence of God (pp. 28-34). This argument was criticised by David Hume, who stated that the world is not always in order due to being bombarded with earthquakes, diseases, and murders, to mention but a few irregularities (pp. 34-35). Brown provides diverse views for almost all aspects of religious philosophies being discussed, thus offering a relatively balanced comparison, though there are extra details that could have been included.

Another issue that can be examined is related to references or claims. Almost all explanations in this book are supported with, and proven by, particular verses from each Holy Book, as well as perspectives from theologians, philosophers, scientists, and spiritual leaders. The comparative and critical approaches that are demonstrated are able to broaden and deepen students' understandings, meaning that their grasp on religion is unlikely to be monolithic, nor can religious variance always be treated separately, because there might be significant overlaps or common ground. Here, for instance, the teaching of peace-making seems to be central: wars are a last resort according to the New Testament (p. 244) and the Quran (p. 246) even if, of course, there are some texts in the Old Testament and the Quran themselves that contain heroism and expressions of pride about military victories, which should be carefully and comprehensively addressed. Lastly, opinions and religious standpoints offered in this book can spark readers' minds to strive for more dynamic and detailed perspectives on multi-faith communities. Providing additional boxed text containing specific information and classroom tasks might assist readers in deepening their understanding, and the last chapter regarding study skills for exams (pp. 272-82) seems appropriate and advantageous for students who desire success in completing their GCSE course.

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