

Editorial

Religious Diversity and the Challenge of Social Inclusion

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Abstract

As societies have become religiously diverse in ways and extents not familiar in the recent histories of most, the issues of how to include this diversity and how to manage it, that is, questions about how to be a religiously diverse society have come to the fore. As a result religion has become part of the social policy conversation in new ways. It has also occasioned new thinking about religions, their forms and the complexity of ways they are negotiated by adherents and the ways they are related to society, the state and each other. This issue of *Social Inclusion* explores these issues of social inclusion in both particular settings and in cross-national comparative studies by presenting research and critical thought on this critical issue facing every society today.

Keywords

interreligious relations; multiculturalism; religion; religions and violence; religious diversity; social cohesion; social control; social inclusion; social policy

Issue

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Religion is back on the agenda in ways that were not predicted by Western social science. The news is full of reports of the role of religion in social conflict, politics, and social policy issues. In the West the resurgence of religion can be traced to the return to politics of conservative Protestant groups and to the increase in religious diversity occasioned by migration. Globalisation, particularly in the form of migration which has brought religious diversity to the lived experience of almost every society in the world. Finally, the end of the cold war brought an end to strict anti-religious secularism in communist countries resulting in a resurgence of religion. The theme uniting these resurgences is religious diversity.

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thinking about religions, their forms and the complexity of ways they are negotiated by adherents and the ways they are related to society, the state and each other. This issue of *Social Inclusion* explores these issues of social inclusion in both particular settings and in cross-national comparative studies by presenting research and critical thought on this critical issue facing every society today.

Social inclusion refers to the processes, structures and policies instituted by a society to promote the degree of social cohesion required to be sufficiently productive to achieve sustainability. Each society does this but often in quite different ways. Some see control and the enforcement of a dominant ideology as critical, others see the release of creative energies enabled by greater freedom to be the best way. There are other mixed modes and may be ways yet to be described.

Religious diversity has been seen to challenge social cohesion both in classical sociology emerging in a Europe redolent with memories of violent conflict among religious groups and the violent imposition of religious

order. Maintaining religious homogeneity is not an option for most societies today. There is no single answer to the social inclusion of many religions. Moreover, as religion continues to be or re-enters the field of social policy it does so in four basic ways – as an object of policy, as a source of policy, as an implementer of policy and as a critic of policy. There is also a complexity of ways religions relate to each other, to the state and to adherents. The articles in this issue provide insight into this diversity and some integrating approaches that can be tested as more research is done in this area.

Articles providing a theoretical perspective on religious diversity and social inclusion include Beaman who uses specific examples of judicial review of religious rights using insights of Derridas to identify ‘national values’ which when deployed through law, policy and public discourse, have exclusionary effects rather than working to social inclusion. Sajoo explores the issue of extremisms and inclusion in both Muslim majority countries and in the West. He notes the failure of secularist political ideologies to motivate inclusion. Rather, he argues that ‘pluralisms that draw on theologies of inclusion, beyond mere accommodation or tolerance, offer the prospect of bridging modernist divides toward a richer civic identity’. In arguing that ‘the aspiration here is to mobilize religious affiliation as a contributor to civic ethics’ Sajoo opens the way to consider the role of religions in producing social cohesion, rather than being passive units managed by outside forces.

Several articles examine particular processes of inclusion or exclusion. Boucher and Kucinskis report on the ways religious students face forms of exclusion in secular collegiate environments raising a less often examined form of interreligious relations, those between religious and non-religious groups. Jackson provides a valuable overview of the complex diversity of approaches to teaching about religions in schools in Europe much of which has inclusion as one goal.

A rich diversity of articles describe religious diversity and social inclusion in particular countries or socie-

ties. Pratt provides a social history of the emergence of policies of mutual respect among diverse religious groups in New Zealand giving not only a valuable case history, but also evidence that many of the issues faced today have been with us for some time. The complexities of religious diversity in Latin America are helpfully discussed by Zavala-Pelayo and Góngora-Mera in an attempt to correct the misconceptions of many existing approaches to studying religious life in Latin America. Nollert and Sheikhzadegan explore different forms of inclusion and participation among religious groups in Switzerland. The Australian case is described by Lynch through the lens of an exploration of the role of Catholics in social policy debates. Ricucci raises the importance of examining changes in diversity within religious communities by demonstrating ways Catholic migrant youth to Italy negotiate their settlement and religious identity. Lisovskaya describes the situation in post-Soviet Russia opening a fascinating case of a state moving from enforced irreligion to enforced education about religions. Šehagić examines the case of the consequences of religious conflict in Bosnia and the role of identities in attempts to re-establish social inclusion. These case studies provide no foundation for easy generalisation and stand resolutely in the face of attempts to transport a ‘success’ from one society to another. The global is transformed in the local.

The temptation to draw themes and conclusions from these essays is as seductive as it is impossible. The reader will be informed of a wealth of diversity in the forms, shapes and management of religious diversity. Different challenges from specific rituals or beliefs are further complicated by very different roles played by the state. The experience of diversity differs between highly local relationships to changes in the ways societies see themselves.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

About the Author



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