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New Social Patterns: Old Educational Structures? Comparative Perspectives on How Diversity Challenges Religious Education in Europe

Abstract: New social patterns of increased societal diversity when it comes to religions and worldviews have challenged traditional forms of Religious Education (RE) in European school systems. This has led to an increased research interest in religious education and diversity, which is probably the most explored topic in the field of RE, for decades and presently. In this paper, I make an incision into the debates to represent these developments. I will be visiting "classics" such as 'the Interpretive Approach' and 'Signposts' but give special attention to comparative studies. By this I wish to enlighten the debate from a supranational perspective; a perspective transcending the often very intense national debates. Attention will be paid to issues such as the relationship between Church, State and RE in Europe, Human Rights Issues, and education about and into Islam in European states. Lastly, I am also to comment on some recent debates in England; and in Norway, where there is a new national curriculum from 2020. I will keep a focus on the question "what is the role of scholarship" in RE?

Keywords: Religious diversity; religious education; comparative perspectives; church, state and RE in Europe; Islamic Religious Education

1 Introduction

This article is based on a keynote at the European Academy of Religion in Bologna in 2022. An aim was to represent Religious Education (RE) in a context where religion and plurality in general was on the agenda. To give a perspective on the significance of diversity for developments within RE was a tremendous task, because

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111026176-002

in the field of RE, the issue of increased societal religious diversity has for decades been one of the most discussed topics. To start from a personal perspective, societal religious diversification was the reason why I entered the field, as one of the first in Norway with a religious studies background, at a time when educational policy shifted to one inclusive RE subject for all. The historical background in Norway was a long tradition of Lutheran Christian Education. It was the Reformation that motivated the introduction of schooling for all in 1739. This happened after the Danish king, who ruled Norway at the time, had converted from Catholic to Protestant. Christian Education was for a long time the main aim of general schooling, but over time in the process of the European Enlightenment and other societal developments, education got additional purposes. Today RE in Norway is a small subject among other school subjects, with the purpose of learning about religion, worldviews, philosophy, and ethics.

Between 1974 and 1997 a secular Worldviews school subject existed as an alternative in Norway, though the majority of children had Christian RE. From 1997, after a period of increased religious diversification due to immigration, Norway got one inclusive RE subject for all, in the Norwegian comprehensive centralised educational system.[1] There is a limited right to exemption from activities, not from knowledge content. This has been controversial and a reoccurring topic in political debates. Parental complaints by secular humanists were brought before the European court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, with a verdict against the state of Norway in 2007. The verdict stated that parental rights were not sufficiently respected (Lied 2009). Due to this, the national curriculum and the legislation was adjusted. The name of the subject has shifted with shifting policies, and the present name is *Christianity, Religion, Worldviews and Ethics ("KRLE").* The specific mention of Christianity in the name, was taken out after the verdict in Strasbourg, but was reinserted when politics shifted to a conservative government in 2013, against strong opposition. Societal debates on RE and school is ongoing in Norway as it is in many European countries today.

Though my own starting point is Norway, I will have a broad European perspective in this article. In the following I will start with a general introduction to the theme *Religious Education and Diversity*, then focus on *Comparative Perspectives.* I include also comments on *Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Europe.* Towards the end I will comment on some *Recent Developments in England and in*

1 In Norway private alternatives to state schools hardly exist. Very few schools of alternative pedagogy exist, such as Waldorf schools, and a very low number of religiously based schools exists, all of them Christian. In effect more or less all Norwegian pupils have this inclusive RE (Skeie and Bråten 2014, 219–220).

Norway before some *Concluding Remarks*. I will keep a focus on the question "what is the role of scholarship in RE"?[2]

2 Religious Education and Diversity

The situation in Norway back in the second half of the 1990s, was that this new inclusive RE-subject was introduced. Now "all" religions should be taught to all children. In effect, what was taught was five world religions, secular humanism as worldview, and philosophy and ethics (the latter mainly based on Western traditions). In teacher education at the time, most RE teachers had Christian studies or theology background. As one of the first with a religious studies background, my first responsibility was to teach the *'other'* religions. Later, 'othering' in inclusive models became a concern in my own research (Bråten 2013, 202–207). Around the introduction of inclusive RE in Norway, many were looking to England. A similar inclusive subject had developed there, since 1988 in the national legislation, and even before that in local areas because of the system of constructing the syllabi for RE at local levels. Some professionals such as Robert Jackson (University of Warwick) and John Hull (University of Birmingham) were brought over to Norway to enlighten the debate.

The Interpretive Approach (Jackson 1997) is the result of a pioneering work by a team of researchers at the University of Warwick, aimed at solving the challenge posed to RE by increased societal religious diversity. Children and parents had a greater variety of different religious backgrounds than the selection of materials for teaching in school represented. This could mean that a child is taught about his / her "own" tradition, in a way which is alien to him / her - or learns about religion in ways which are not useful for understanding more about their own or other people's religions in the present diverse society. The internal diversity of the grand religious traditions also became obvious as the work by the Warwick team was based on ethnographic studies into the lives of, for instance "Hindu children in Britain" (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993). It gave a certain focus on the "lived" side of religion, which is probably closer to children's experience than tenets of faith, or the history of the traditions which was often the traditional content of school learning. The approach is anthropological in its perspectives / theoretical foundation, but this is

2 This was a challenge posed to me when I was given the assignment of delivering this keynote.

combined with profound pedagogical groundwork that put the child in the centre of the attention.[3]

Jackson distinguishes between religion as grand *traditions*, *groups* within those traditions, and *individuals*. This pedagogical approach encourages an understanding of religion as dynamic and evolving, countering essentialising representations which can create harmful stereotypes of religions in education, presented as simple fixed entities. There are three main principles to reflect on in teaching religion in a plural context according to the *Interpretive Approach*: *representation*: how a religion is represented, what is selected as the content of teaching and thus forming what students take away from the teaching; *interpretation*: how materials for study is interpreted by students, and *reflexivity*: for students to reflect on that which is presented to them in relation to their own experiences / backgrounds. This would ensure reflecting on the relevance of what is learned, in and for their own lives.

In the project "Bridges to Religion", the Warwick team produced a series of booklets which illustrated this pedagogical idea (e.g., Barrett 1994). Here children in schools studying religion met the major religious traditions (in Britain mainly Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism) through adherents like themselves in age. The material presents a glimpse of what it is like for children to live in and with their religion. From such an entry students can move to contextualise that experience in relation to that child's immediate relations, such as groups within that religion that the child and his / her family belong to. In this way one gets an alternative route to learning about the grand religious traditions, which puts the children's lived experiences in the centre of attention (Jackson 1997).

The *Interpretive Approach* is possibly the most well-known theory of diversity and RE, and has spurred widespread interest, debate, and controversy. Here I only include one example: Leni Franken revisited the theoretical foundations of it, in an article from 2018 ("Religious Studies and Nonconfessional RE: Countering the Debates"), arguing that the *Interpretive Approach* is a possible way out of ongoing debates about dilemmas of what are neutral grounds for inclusive RE.

"One problem for religious education is that "religions" and "cultures" are rarely presented in a vibrant, flexible, and organic way. RE tends to treat 'religions' as discrete belief systems, and 'cultures' (when they are discussed at all) as separate,

3 In Norway Sissel Østberg (1998) and Tove Nicolaisen (2018) have conducted ethnographic research inspired by the work in Warwick. Lars Iversen (2012), Oddrun M. H. Bråten (2013), and many others have been inspired by and have cooperated with Professor Jackson over the years. Especially professor Geir Skeie, whose main interest has been religious education and diversity, has worked closely with him, for instance in the 8 countries EU project "REDCo": Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflicts in transforming societies of European countries (e.g. Weisse 2010).

bounded entities". Franken (2018) quotes Jackson's book *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (1997, 47).

> The "content" of RE is not simply data provided by the teacher but includes the knowledge and experience of the participants and an interactive relationship between the two. The specialist religious education teacher, working with children from diverse backgrounds, needs the professional skill to manage learning that is dialectical. If teachers can have the right degree of sensitivity towards their students' own positions, as well as to the material studied, and can develop appropriate pedagogies, then a genuinely conversational form of RE can take place which can handle diversity.[4]

We see that here, there is no demand for the teacher to have a particular religious or theological / religious studies background, rather it is a demand for the teacher to have professional skills. With this, Franken claims, dilemmas of "outsiders" vs. "insiders" are countered, through the pedagogical approach.

2.1 The Role of Scholarship: *Signposts* as Example

Regarding the question "*What is the role of scholarship in religious education*?", it could initially be helpful to make the distinction between *role vis a vis policy* and *role vis a vis educational practice*. Geir Skeie (2017) has found that since the 1990s research in the field of RE in the Nordic countries has had a focus on the complexity of (religious) diversity, including teachers' strategies to handle this. A development in research interest in the Nordic countries had gone from a pedagogical focus on teaching Christianity, in the main, to how to handle societal plurality. Because of this, the scholarly debate on diversity and RE is quite advanced, but this has little impact at the political level, where the focus is rather on whether Christianity has a special role in the country's cultural heritage and thus in society and in education. For instance, in Norway political debates about RE are linked to the school's values clause, which lists certain foundational values seen as rooted in "Christian and Humanistic heritage and tradition". At the same time as maintaining a cultural heritage where Christianity is seen as having a special role, it is also an explicit aim of inclusive RE to contribute to societal integration (see also Iversen 2012). Thus, Norwegian RE could be seen as a train on two tracks, where one is to contribute to integration in the face of increased societal diversity, while another is to maintain a "Christian and Humanist" cultural heritage. The political debate about this subject

[4] Franken (2018) quoting Jackson's book *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (2004, 89).

is however far removed from insights from the body of research and its discussions of the diversity and pedagogy.

Regarding the role of scholarship on a European level, I regard *Signposts – Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (Jackson 2014) a substantial effort to bridge the gaps of research and policy, and research and practice. The background was that policy already being agreed on by the countries of the Council of Europe, was not followed up nationally (Jackson 2014, 7–19). Thus, in *Signposts*, Jackson tries to explain it, in a form which is applicable for practical usage. For instance, an important distinction is made between "understanding religion(s)" and "religious understanding" (p. 22), recognizing that outsiders and insiders' perspectives has distinctive qualities. Both may be important for understanding religion(s) as an aspect of own and others culture. Strangely, issues of religion have often been left to one side when *Intercultural Education* has been on the agenda (e.g., Jackson 2014, 21–22). From such a perspective it is also a matter of how religion could be brought into that mix. This is however not to say that that is all that RE could be or, empirically speaking, *is*. This becomes apparent through further mapping of the realities of RE at schools in Europe conducted since then for instance in the book series *Religious Education at schools in Europe* (for each of the six volumes there are different co-editors besides Martin Rothgangel and Martin Jäggle 2015–2020.)

Some main topics in *Signposts* include issues of terminology internationally, religious literacy (p. 27–31), competence and didactics for understanding religions (p. 33–46), the classroom as "safe space" for student-to-student dialogue within the school (p. 47–57), the representation of religion in the media, and also books and other resources (p. 59–65), non-religious convictions and world views (p. 67–75), human rights issues, (p. 77–86), and linking schools to wider communities and organisations, (p. 87–97). On all those topics RE research is cited, and research and debates are also developed further since then. One such development, initiated by Robert Jackson himself, was a special issue of the journal *Intercultural Education.* Dealing with education in plural societies is the focus of the journal, and here perspectives on religious plurality in an intercultural context is allocated a space within the broader debate on plurality and education. In this special issue there is a focus on Inclusive RE, featuring articles like: "The relationship between religious education and intercultural education" (Lund Johannesen & Skeie 2018), "Issues in the integration of religious education and worldviews education in an intercultural context" (Bråten & Everington 2018) and "Qur'anic education and non-confessional RE: an intercultural perspective (Berglund & Gent 2018)".

Has *Signposts* affected *policy* on national levels? To a very limited degree it could seem, according to a recent comment by Martin Rothgangel, in the book *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study* (Franken and Gent 2021).

I will get back to this in the section about Islam in education below. Has *Signposts* effected *practice?* Despite the effort to bridge the gap, *Signposts* could be seen as aiming for impact on the policy level rather than the level of practice. However, it has been translated to 13 languages, and there are teacher training modules based on it available at the European Wergeland Centre.[5] To the extent that *Signposts* is being read by actors close to practice, like teachers and teacher educators, and they pick up points seen as relevant in their own teaching practice, then the research that this is based on will have an impact. Ideas discussed in *Signposts* may have an impact on practice even if they were not integrated in national policy in a formal way. However, the impact of research on both policy and practice is hard to track, and here more research is needed to be able to answer this with more accuracy. A key point regarding the role of scholarship in education is whether, or to what degree, teachers or even teacher educators read the increasing body of research on RE or have an idea of what insights this body of research represents. A better overview of this body of research could be called for, for instance through more reviews. Strengthening of education for RE teachers would also be important.

3 Comparative Perspectives

When I came into the field of Religious Education, at a time of shift to an inclusive model in Norway, many were looking to England for inspiration. I think two main things caused me to do a PhD with Robert Jackson at the University of Warwick: 1. When I encountered the *Interpretive Approach* it gave me directions regarding how to proceed with teaching in the new inclusive RE subject in Norway, and 2. I wanted to understand the English context where some impulses came from. It soon became apparent that I was going to do a comparative study of RE in England and Norway, but it was not apparent how. In the process, the *methodology* developed in order to conduct the study, became a main point, visualised in the title of the book: *Towards a Methodology for Comparative Studies in Religious Education: A Study of England and Norway* (Bråten 2013). The core of the methodology and example of main findings in my original study is presented in the article 'Three dimensions and four levels: towards a methodology for comparative religious education' (Bråten 2015).

5 *Signposts teacher training module, Teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* – The European Wergeland Centre (https://theewc.org/resources/signposts-teacher-training-module-teaching-about-religions-and-non-religious-world-views-in-intercultural-education/[accessed on March 25, 2024]).

The background for the suggested methodology was multidisciplinary, collecting perspectives from comparative education, comparative religious studies, and pioneering works in comparative RE (Bråten 2013, 29–55). One point in my conceptualisation of comparative studies here, is that it is about the study of internationally shared problems and how they affect different (national) contexts. It is to have *a supranational perspective*, meaning a view transcending the often very intense national debates. The idea to focus on the impact of internationally shared problems on national processes is acquired from comparative education. The methodology is analytic rather than purely descriptive, aiming at comparative analysis. I claim it is suited to explain variations across national cases and have tried to demonstrate this point further in later publications.

I argue that three dimensions should be considered in comparative studies: *supranational, national,* and *subnational processes*, which is one of two core ideas of this methodology. The methodology is illustrated by this model:

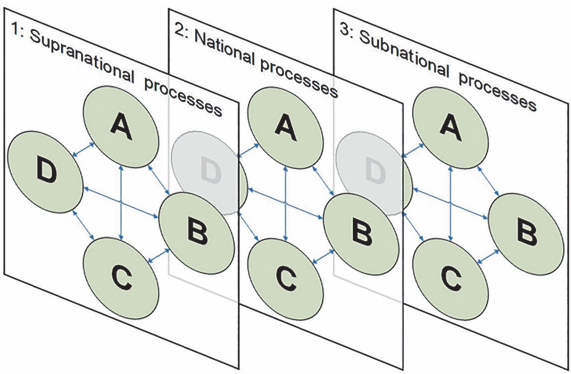

Fig. 1: Model of the three dimensions and four levels methodology

Here we see these three dimensions, and they are conceptualized as processes. These are processes which are seen to potentially affect RE teaching and learning. This is combined with four levels, which is really 'levels of curriculum', an idea gained from Jon Goodlads theories of curricula (e.g. Goodlad & Su 1992). In this model there is:

A. a societal level (perceptions and debates in the society, including research)
B. an institutional level (formal written curricula)
C. an instructional level (teaching)
D. an experiential level (students learnings and experiences)

The levels are included to secure stronger validity in comparative studies through thoroughness in exploring national history and local school systems - and acknowledging the complexity of 'curriculum'. I have argued that together the dimensions and the levels make up a map of domains of relevance for teaching and learning in RE. As such it is also suitable for finding new research questions, for instance of relationships between domains (Bråten 2016, 46).[6] I distinguish also between *formal and informal processes*, where for example verdicts in the European court of Human Rights are examples of a *formal* supranational process. In Norway such a verdict affected national formal curriculum in 2007/8 (Lied 2009). Societal changes of the population's relationship to religion(s) and worldviews locally, nationally, and internationally, for instance through processes of globalisation and mediatisation, would be examples of *informal* processes.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the arrows in the model: illustrating how this is not a top-down model of how policy effects practice but is rather meant to illustrate how impulses can go either way. For instance, it was the increased numbers of immigrant children in Birmingham UK, which spurred John Hulls, famous 1975 innovative interreligious Birmingham agreed syllabus (Birmingham 1975). I call these impulses *'bypasses'* (Bråten 2013, 193, see also Korsvoll 2021).[7] Impulses from *Signposts* on teaching in national / local contexts, even when the national policy does not reflect those ideas, would also be examples of *bypasses*. In this case impulses from international policy and research are bypassing the formal level of curriculum, into practice, and thus impact practice despite perhaps not having impacted policy.

6 Questions about relationships between domains could for instance be, what is the student's relationship to societal debates on RE? What is the relationship between the formal written curriculum and what / how teachers teach? What is the relationship between education at a local level and debates about RE at a national, or even supranational level? For example: in a small village in Lofoten, Norway, the local school suddenly has a number of Catholic students, as their parents have migrated from Poland to work in the fishing industry. Does the local teacher imagine Polish Catholicism as part of the context when she teaches about Christianity?

7 Lately Korsvoll (2021) has identified a bypass in an analysis of how textbook authors in Norway emphasised plurality and tolerance more than could be expected based on the formal Norwegian National Curriculum for RE. While in the formal curriculum ideas of Christian and humanist national heritage were emphasised more, in the textbooks the focus was on integrative perspectives with regard to increased societal worldviews diversity.

3.1 New Social Patterns: Old Educational Structures, Comparative Perspectives on How Diversity Challenges Religious Education in Europe

The book series *Religious Education at Schools in Europe* maps RE in all European countries. Each nation report is arranged in 12 categories, providing a source of amazing overviews of the situation for RE in Europe, and an ideal material for further comparative analysis.[8] For Part 2: Western Europe I was challenged to give a comparative perspective of aspects of RE in those countries represented in the volume: Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and England.

In the analysis, I utilized the three dimensions and four levels methodology. I called this chapter *"New Social Patterns: Old Structures? How the Countries of Western Europe Deal with Religious Plurality in Europe."* This title reflected the results of the analysis. In this article I considered the traditional religious landscapes, the societal plurality in those countries consisted of at the time, and current conceptions and tasks of RE. While striking differences in conceptions and tasks for RE were apparent, challenges discussed in all chapters related to increased religious diversity. Yet, the way that these challenges are dealt with in each setting, was very different.

I found four main approaches to dealing with religious diversity *in educational systems* (p. 305, see also Bråten 2016, 44):

1. To maintain a religiously plural educational system (e.g. Belgium: private religious schools dominate)
2. To promote a common educational system with inclusive RE (e.g. Scotland)
3. In the face of secularity, education strictly about religious facts (France)
4. Parallel subject options (e.g. in State schools in Belgium)

It becomes clear that there is often more than one way of dealing with religious plurality in one country, for instance between private and state schools, or between

8 In addition to the chapter *"New social patterns: old structures? How the countries of Western Europe deal with religious plurality in Europe"* (Bråten 2014b) which I will elaborate on below, I also contributed to the chapter "Religious Education at Schools in Norway" (Skeie and Bråten 2014), and to an introductory chapter to Part 3: Northern Europe, named "Are Oranges the only fruits: A discussion of comparative studies in Religious Education in relation to the plural nature of the field internationally" (Bråten 2014a). An issue here is whether REs across Europe are so different that comparisons make any sense, but despite apparent huge differences and conceptual confusions between languages, I argue to the contrary, that comparative efforts create new insights, and a new possibility to reflect on one's own home context (Bråten 2014a).

regions of independent educational systems within a country (sub national dimension in the model above). The kind of responses to religious diversity that existed, depended heavily on national religious- and school history, or "the tale thereof" (see 'national imaginary' as explained below). In the tale of the history of the nation, religion is often allocated a specific role, and this history is described as "deep", cultural and intersecting with the identity of the nation. A quote from the chapter on Belgium illustrates this point:

> Religious Education in Belgium, in the public realm of the school, is dealing with this broader European and global diversity, but because of the small space of the country and its deep history, the discourses on religious education seem to be even more intense. (Derroitte et al. 2014, 57)

Thus, a pattern of "same but different" came to the fore, that the state / school / religion relationship in history, or the tale of it, seemed determent for what possibilities were available presently in each national context, to address societal diversity. This left me pondering for several reasons, but among other things because, even if the task of writing this chapter had expanded my own views, this finding was based on one chapter from each of those countries, while the England-Norway comparison conducted earlier was much more thorough about national contexts. To explore the matter further, I called a symposium at NCRE in Trondheim (2019) and the result became a Special Issue (SI) of *Religion & Education* (Vol. 48(3)), published in 2021. Here scholars with previous experience of comparative studies explored the question of *how religion in different contexts, including history, impacts (religious) education systems*. Attention to methodology for comparative studies is also followed up in this issue.

In my original study (Bråten 2013, 113) I had found that specific similarities between English and Norwegian RE were somewhat incidental. Pluralisation of society is put forward as a reason for change to inclusive models in both countries, but whether changes could happen seemed to depend on nation-specific factors, particularly the history of church, state and religion, or *the tale thereof*. This is why a combined focus on the supranational and the national is necessary. Why did changes to inclusive models happen in some places but not others where societal diversity is no less?

My work with the article *"New Social Patterns: Old Structures?* (Bråten 2014b) had revealed a pattern of increased religious diversity in the population (documented by statistics sited in the books chapters), and school systems and forms of RE that seemed to be resisting adjusting to those changes. In the introduction to the special issue I therefore present this as *a hypothesis* for further exploration: *that new social patterns reflecting the present plurality are not sufficiently accounted for*

in educational systems, as they rather reflect the traditional religious landscapes. This is explored in the articles in the issue, and in the following I will include some comments based on some of them.[9]

In "The Role of Space and Time: A Comparative Exploration of Religion and Education, Introduction to the Special Issue" (Bråten 2021b), I elaborate on the concept "*national imaginary*", which is also discussed in my original comparative work (Bråten 2013, 115–118). When history is described as 'deep' and connected to religion, identity, culture, I have used the idea of 'national imaginary' to describe this (Schiffauer et al. 2004, 4–8), and to catch the fact that the idea of history is not identical to what really happened. It is 'the tale of' the history of the nation rather than what happened. Benedict Anderson (1983) has described 'imagined communities', and Charles Taylor refers to this when he writes about 'modern social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004). A country's religious history is often very particular and related to the idea of the nation. In the process of enlightenment, belonging to modern nations became bundled together with religions in different ways. However, during the second half of the 20th century religion and national identity has become unbundled for a significant amount of people (Andersland 2021, 61–62).

For instance, today, for Islamic Norwegians, nationality is not relevant for religious identity. For others living in that same country however, it is relevant, but in the face of the pluralisation it becomes important to negotiate new ways of integrating religious and national identity, for instance through a rhetoric that all share in the Christian cultural heritage, if not the Christian faith. I believe this bundling and unbundling of religion and nation becomes particularly visible when looking at debates about RE in national school systems.

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9 Short note on articles in the SI which is not elaborated below: Doney, J. (2021) "Unearthing Ecumenical Influences on Educational Policy in England and Norway using Statement Archology": is about "digging out" how something becomes possible, here focusing on the Christian Ecumenical movement as a supranational process that made inclusive RE possible – in England and Norway. It illustrates how history affected what happened, but also what might happen today. In Eastern Europe, inclusive RE did not so far become possible, typically RE is catechetical. In "The RE-Puzzle of the Visegrád-Group and the Answer of 'Collective Memory'" Rothgangel, M. (2021b) compares RE in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, which share a history of being part of the Habsburg empire, by using theory of collective memory. He thus explores some other kinds of "structures" in addition to state and church relationships. In Miedema (2021) "A Postlude on Adequate Methodologies for Comparative Research Regarding the Relation of Religion / Worldview and Education", he notes how articles even in this issue reflect a longstanding strong focus on context in RE-research. He refers to Skeie (2013, 249–272) who has noted a "contextual turn" in research on religion and education, that we have "seen in religious education research an increasing emphasis on the relationship between objects of study and their social and cultural surroundings, and this has been discussed not only as a methodological, but also as an epistemological issue".

In "Church, State and RE in Europe: Past, Present, Future" Leni Franken (2021) explains why some "structures" are so hard to change: both religion and schooling are frequently integrated into nations' constitutions. As a background for the legislation one can find conflicts from the past, laid to a form of rest. Real structural shifts to models more suitable to the new situation with increased societal diversity therefore require constitutional amendments. Since there is often no political will to do so, the gap to "worldviews realities" among the student population widens. In this situation, teachings in school can be perceived to be irrelevant by the students and parents. Franken even finds that sometimes *pragmatic shifts* happen with "creative interpretations of constitutions" as teachers and schools experience the problem as quite pressing (Franken 2021, 428).

In this article a finding is also that shifts to integrative models have been easier in countries where the church has historically been a state actor. This kind of inclusive RE seems to have become possible in those nations that were historically Protestant, such as the Nordic countries, England, Wales, and Scotland. In cases of stricter separation between states and religion, typically in traditionally Catholic countries in southern parts of Europe, shifts to integrative models have (largely) not become possible. For instance, in Belgium, this means a large percentage of the schools are private and Catholic with forms of catholic RE (though sometimes described as "open"). At the same time there is an amazingly plural / secular population if you look at the statistics. Thus, provision in school is far removed from the realities of students and parents' real worldviews, but because of the historical and political significance of, in this case, the Catholic Church, in national and school history, there is little political will for changes of the constitution on this point.[10] In a sense this finding has some similarities with Skeie's (2017) findings regarding the Nordic countries, despite entirely different school systems and RE there, with a Protestant history and an integrative form of RE, in the sense that even here there is a gap between RE-research and RE-policy. In both national cases we apparently see a conflict between pedagogical intent to teach in a way relevant to students, and to suite political aims having to do with historical and juridical relations between religion, state, and school. School and education are very politicised issues, and no less so when the subject at hand is religion. There is a danger that RE becomes a means not so much for children's learning, as for different political agendas.

The pragmatic solutions Franken reveals, showcase the gap between pedagogies to adjust to societal realities, and formal structures of education. It seems that "traditional religion" is holding its grounds, both in integrative and separative

10 Still, with intense societal debates changes are also happening in many countries, and even in Belgium, as is also documented in this article.

forms of RE. In integrated models, as for instance in Norway, it is still Christianity in the main, often with reference to its importance as cultural heritage. A problem with this approach is also that Christianity is represented as "Norwegian" rather than global, so that the Christian diversity, which is a reality in Norway today, is not well represented either. In effect, neither for instance Islam nor the often-privileged Christian faith(s) are taught as living, negotiated, present and global religions, which students in today's plural, globalised media reality meet.

Considering the discrepancy between existing educational systems and societal developments, how are these systems justified? As it turned out, in "New Social Patterns, Old Structures", ensuring Human Rights was central in all these country models. Ensuring Human Rights was used as an argument for justifying almost diametrically opposite systems (as for instance in Belgium vs. France, Bråten 2014b, 304). This is interesting also because, as we know, several cases concerning RE have been brought before ECtHR, and these court cases bring attention to the situation for religious *minorities*. In "The Effects of Judgements by the European Court of Human Rights on Religious Education in England and Turkey" by Abdurrahman Hendek and Nigel Fancourt (2021), they find that such verdicts are used selectively by politicians of different nations, to justify their own politics. In their article they see how England having no verdicts against them, while Turkey has two, is a major difference in how important such international jurisprudence becomes in the national debates. In so doing they explore the relationship between national debates and politics and the formal supranational processes in ECtHR. While all nations are in principle bound by the same principles and verdicts, the effects and use of them in national politics varies greatly.

Increased diversity of worldview is not only about religious worldviews. There is also a significant increase of people identifying as 'not religious' (Jackson 2014, 67–75, Bråten 2014b, 291). Paralleled to processes of *pluralisation*, there is also a process of *secularisation* – but what does that mean? Research into the worldviews of those claiming to have "no religion" reveal 'nones' to hold very different views, that may or may not be of a spiritual nature (Lee 2015). They may reject or be unfamiliar with traditional religion. Sometimes the religion – secular divide no longer makes sense, so that their worldviews could be described as non-binary (Bråten 2021). In France we find an elaborated debate on the meaning of secular, but how context sensitive are ideas about "secular"? For instance in Eastern Europe it might be associated with a communist past, whereas this is not the case in Norway, where "secular" could be seen as 'neutral'. In his article "Comparing Through Contrast: Reshaping Incongruence into a Mirror", Kristian Niemi (2021) explores how important context is for the meaning of concepts like "secular" and "religion". He describes how "secular" in India is nothing like "secular" in Sweden. That his research questions were framed from a Swedish idea of "secular" and "religious", caused the

"friction" when studying RE in India. Through the act of comparing and exploring the "friction", he gains new views on Sweden (Niemi 2021, 470).

An example of "friction" is when his Swedish ideas of what "secular" is and what "religious" is, appear as coloured by a Christian Protestant view, in the sense that his understanding of "religion" was primarily understood as *"belief" / words*, whereas in India religion is often translated to dharma, meaning *"duties" / actions*. Niemi's article is a development of methodology as well, introducing the idea of "mirroring", and the concepts "comparandum" (the frame), "comparatum" (mirror glass).

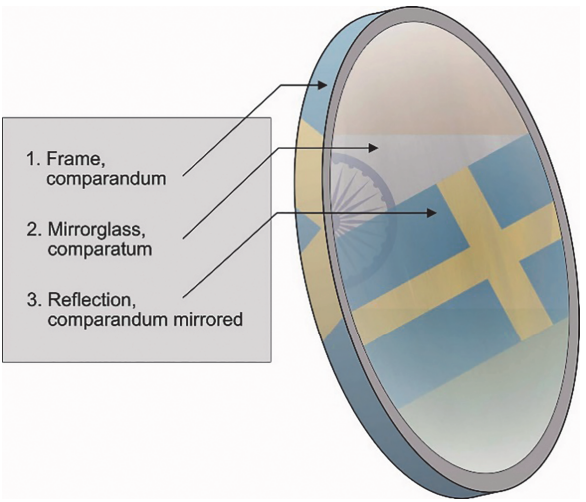

Fig. 2: Model illustrating Niemi's ideas of 'mirroring" (Niemi 2021, 470)

Through the act of comparing and exploring the 'friction', here meaning lack of similar meaning of core concepts (secular / religion), in the reflection he gains new perspectives on Sweden. The effort to compare RE despite the friction, can even be said to contribute to the larger debates of the meaning of such core concepts in religious studies as such. In using India as a "comparatum" he makes visible an Eurocentrism, in the way 'secular' and 'religious' is understood in Swedish RE.

3.2 Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Europe

I will comment on Islam based on a recent publication: *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study* (Franken & Gent 2021). The background for this

initiative, was the increased number of Muslim students in schools across Europe, and increasing attention for Islamic RE, not the least in the perspective of discourses of radicalisation, politisation and securitisation. One question is what the relationship is between what states / society expect from (I)RE, and what Muslim communities expect.

By initiating an anthology with a comparative perspective, Franken and Gent create an overview of *forms of* and *embeddedness for* IRE across Europe. The book contains 14 country reports. The selection is countries where Muslims are a significant minority, with some exceptions such as Cyprus where in parts there is a Muslim majority. In addition, there is a commentary section with short chapters on topics such as "Postcolonial and Feminist Perspectives in Islamic Religious Education" (Marianne Hafnor Bø) and "Teaching about Islam: Insights from Hermeneutics" (Farid Panjwani).

Four main forms of embeddedness for IRE are identified:

- IRE (education into), in state schools (e.g. Belgium, Austria)
- Education *about* Islam, in state schools (e.g. Sweden, Norway)
- IRE in Islamic schools (e.g. the Netherlands, France)
- RE in confessional (Christian) schools (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany)

Through focusing on Islamic RE some general points regarding RE are enlightened, at the same time as Islam specifically gets some much-needed attention. In the words from Hendek (2021) book review, *"The fate of RE determines the fate of IRE in a country"*: a point which could not be caught without a comparative perspective. In my short chapter I compare, in brief, IRE in Cyprus, the Netherlands and Denmark based on the country reports. The comparison illustrated quite clearly how the national contexts determines what kind of IRE there is: if Christian RE is confessional, IRE (and other kinds of REs) is confessional; if the history is of strict separation of state and religion, there is no RE, and thus no IRE in state schools (such as in France), and it seems it was in areas where traditionally Protestant state churches dominated, where inclusive RE developed, through the terms of the inclusiveness is also an issue. Here we now find IRE as teaching about rather than into Islam, as part of inclusive RE subjects.

What we can actually claim to see in a comparative perspective, is how parts of European history that regulated Christianity / Christian RE through historical bickering back and forth between Christian religions and European states, created a certain deal for Christian Education specific to each state / nation (see also Franken 2021). In each case this deal for Christian RE is expanded to "other" religions, such as Islam. A question is, however, how well that fits? Maybe the deal for teaching about or into forms of Christian religion, needs to be renegotiated to fit Islam specifically. The history of Christianity and Islam in Europe are very

different, and yet Islam could also be seen to be a part of European cultural heritage. The comparative perspectives in the mentioned *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study* brings into light the terms and conditions for Islam in education in Europe and contributes to a better foundation for discussing how to improve the situation. A general point may be that *more of Europe's history of different religions needs to be written into, and negotiated vis a vis, the story of the nations and it's alleged "deep history", in effect: European "cultural heritage".* Other than Christian religions such as Islam or Judaism also have a long history of presence in Europe, with their own specific features.

Rothgangel's (2021a) comment "Islamic Religious Education in Europe and European Recommendations as a Mutual Challenge" is relevant for the question of the role of scholarship on policy and practice. In advice such as *Signposts* from the Council of Europe (Jackson 2014), and the Toledo guidelines (from Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 2007) the positive value of teachings that respect everyone's right to freedom of religions and beliefs, and teaching that counter stereotypes and prejudice, is stressed. However, Rothgangel observes that almost no reference to this is made in any of the chapters of *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study* (Franken & Gent 2021). While in the named recommendations religion is seen as a cultural phenomenon that there should be teaching *about*, for integrative purposes, to promote tolerance and societal coherence, this is often not the understanding of the organisers of IRE. He lists several possible reasons for this, but one is that in the often quite hostile societal debate, Muslim pupils feel vulnerable and in need for a "safe space" away from prejudice and discrimination, for instance among peers in Muslim schools. This increases *segregation* at the cost of dialogue and *integration*. Further, the mere complexity of different national contexts where this advice is interpreted (or ignored?), is named as a challenge. How well does the advice fit? This strengthens the view that attention to context is needed.

4 Recent Developments in England and Norway

In England there has for several years now been a murmur of "crisis" (e.g. Conroy et al 2013). A commission of Religious Education has investigated this issue, and in their Final Report from 2018, a way forwards is suggested (CoRE 2018). But the debate continues, and this crisis is on the agenda in Biesta & Hannam's (eds.) book from 2021: *The Forgotten Dimension of Religious Education*.

In my reading I find that according to this book, a forgotten dimension is perspectives on religions as "lived", what it entails to live meaningfully with religion.

However, a main point is how the dimension of religion is lacking in theories of education, while at the same time theories of education are lacking in theories of RE. This is relevant for political argument of justifications for having RE as a subject in schools if there is little agreement over REs nature or purpose. If this crisis is not solved, there is a danger that it will be taken out of the school curriculum. This is, I believe, part of the debate in England presently. For Hannam (chapter 9) a main point of both *Education* and *Religious Education* seems to enable young people to act in a diverse reality, through *subjectification*. This refers to Biesta's theories of education where he distinguishes between *qualification, socialisation, and subjectification*. According to Biesta (chapter 8, 11), subjectification "concerns the ways in which education contributes to the formation of the student as a person – not as an object we try to influence from the outside, so to speak, but as subject in their own right".

In chapter 6 where Gert Biesta interviews Farid Panjwani and Lynn Revel (Biesta, Panjwani and Revell 2021), the focus is *essentialism*, where Islam works as the perfect example of why this is problematic: in the current political climate we find essentialised ideas of what Islam 'really' is. For instance, is Islam compatible with democratic values (or 'British Values')? It is not possible to answer this question fairly with a yes or a no, because Muslims shape Islam and Islam shapes Muslims: Islam is not a static phenomenon, but diverse, context sensitive and evolving, as are also other religions. And still in schools, such questions may be posed to pupils. For instance, we can find such essentialised ideas of religions in textbooks used for children in school. We see how well-educated RE teachers would be important.

Joyce Miller was part of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), that worked on the alleged crisis. In "Reflection on the Seminar on Religion and Education: The Forgotten Dimensions of Religions Education" (Miller 2021), chapter 10 in *The Forgotten Dimension of Religious Education* (Biesta and Hannam 2021), Miller reports that while she was doing investigation for the commission, she did observe a lot of what she regarded good quality teaching, but the problem was the lack of coherence to educational structures that supported it. This could be seen to be part of the same tendency that I identified internationally, in "New Social Patterns: Old Structures" (Bråten 2014b). What she asks for are structures that support more open exploration of religion (and worldviews) as phenomena, including as lived realities in people's lives.

Does the alleged crisis in English RE apply elsewhere, for instance in Norway? That would depend on whether teaching of (world) religions as separate entities continue, with essentialising representation of religions as grand unified and monolithic traditions, *or*, whether a kind of teaching could be facilitated *where open exploration of religion and worldviews can happen:* in a way which is seen as meaningful for students: and meaningful in the wider context of the purpose of

education. A recent suggestion towards such ends in the English context is found in the article "Worldviews and Big Ideas: A Way Forward for Religious Education?" (Freathy & John 2019b).

With regards to a new national curriculum in Norway, which was implemented from 2020, a general point is that subject learning should be meaningful in relation to overarching aims for education. This is specified in three interdisciplinary topics: public health and mastery of life, democracy and citizenship, and sustainable development. These interdisciplinary topics towards which all subjects should contribute, again resonates with more general formulations about the purpose of education as such, in the legislation and general descriptions in this national curriculum. The new National Curriculum also encourages a more open approach to knowledge, in all school subjects, where students are meant to explore issues, and not just learn prefabricated facts. This kind of learning is in policy documents in Norway called deep learning (or in-depth learning) (Bråten and Skeie 2020).

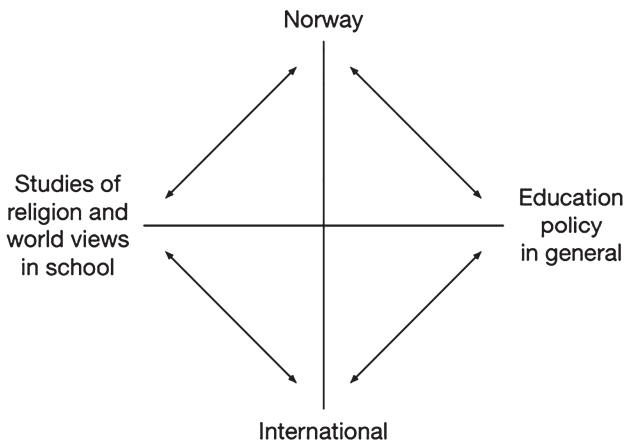

Fig. 3: Dynamics of general and subject specific education policy in an international perspective

The dynamics of educational policy in general and for studies of religion and worldviews in schools specifically, is illustrated in this model (Bråten and Skeie 2020): the model has a general education and specific subject axes, but also a national – international axes. Both educational policy in general and specific to RE, are subject to international trends and exchange of ideas, in formal as well as in informal processes. The model illustrates how specific school subjects are imbedded in the wider context of education. In the history of the inclusive RE subject in Norway since 1997, the curriculum for RE has been changed more frequently than

the general National Curriculum (other school subjects), due to societal and juridical conflicts regarding this subject.[11] However, in the current reform, where the National Curriculum for school is renewed in all subjects, it is particularly obvious how general educational ideas affect developments in RE as a school subject.

A new element is for instance how all subjects should contribute towards the three interdisciplinary topics. Further, according to descriptions of the competences that students in schools should acquire through education in the Norwegian public school, students should understand and be able to use what is learned in new situations. Deep learning is described as follows:

> School must provide room for in-depth learning so that the pupils develop understanding of key elements and relationships in a subject, and so they can learn to apply subject knowledge and skills in familiar and unfamiliar contexts. (...). In-depth learning implies applying knowledge and skills in different ways so that over time the pupils will be able to master various types of challenges in the subject, individually and in interaction with others. (Bråten & Skeie 2020, 8).

For each school subject, *key elements* are replacing detailed lists of learning content, and for RE those key elements are:

1. Knowledge of religions and worldviews
2. Exploring religions and worldviews with different methods
3. Exploring existential questions and answers
4. Being able to take another's view
5. Ethical reflections

Together with Geir Skeie (Bråten and Skeie 2020) I argue that because studies of religion and worldviews in school have a lot to contribute to the three interdisciplinary topics, RE in Norway could be seen as strengthened. It has acquired new specific purposes to contribute within the larger framework for general education. Maybe with this curriculum, where the educational purpose of RE is made clearer, a "crisis" of the sort discussed in the English scene, can be avoided? For instance, more open exploration of religion and worldviews can happen in school education, when one of the core elements of the RE curriculum currently reads "exploring religions and worldviews with different methods"? However, that would depend on what happens with it, in teachers and schools' interpretations, and at the instructional and experiential level of education (see also Figure 1: Model of the three dimensions and four levels methodology).

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11 General reviews happened in 1997, 2006, 2020, additionally specifically for RE there were also changes, in 2002, 2005, 2016 (Bråten and Skeie 2020).

5 Concluding Remarks

In this presentation I have given an incision into the topic of *Religious Education and diversity*, with a focus on comparative perspectives and included also comments on Islam and Education. Towards the end I commented on some recent developments in England and in Norway. I have kept the question of the role of scholarship in RE in mind. I hope in this article to have demonstrated that scholarship on RE has produced valuable insights and thus may be seen to contribute to bringing issues of religious education and diversity forwards. At the same time, I have also given examples to show that the relationship between research, policy and practice is complicated. The model of the three dimensions and four levels methodology (Figure 1), and the model of Dynamics of general and subject specific education policy in an international perspective (Figure 3) both illustrate this point.

A key point regarding the role of scholarship is, whether or to what degree teachers or teacher educators can access the ever-increasing body of research in RE. A better overview of this research could be called for, for instance through more reviews, but strengthening of education for RE teachers could also be seen as important. We have seen how impulses from *Signposts* on teaching in national / local contexts could influence teaching practices, even when the national policy does not reflect the research-based ideas expressed there through bypasses. On a political level, we have seen how historical bundling and unbundling of religion and nations complicates matters, and how certain aspects of religion and society become particularly visible when looking at debates about RE in national school systems. Here RE research becomes relevant also for the wider studies of religious diversity in society. The effort in research to compare RE despite the 'friction', can be said to contribute to the larger debates of the meaning of core concepts in religious studies as such. For instance, in using India as a "comparatum" Niemi (2021) makes visible an Eurocentrism, in the way 'secular' and 'religious' is understood in Swedish RE.

The comparative perspectives in *Islamic Religious Education in Europe: A Comparative Study* (Franken & Gent 2021) brings into light the terms and conditions for Islam and other religions in Education in Europe. The significance of that is to get a better foundation for discussing how to improve the situation, which could be seen as much needed. A general point here is that: *more of Europe's history of different religions needs to be written into, and negotiated vis a vis, the story of the nations and its alleged "deep history", in effect: European "cultural heritage".*

What do we know about what Religious Education (or Religion and Worldviews Education) is, in a comparative perspective? Some suggestions:

– School subjects (with various names, aims and purposes at national levels)
– *The* purpose of Education? (as it once was in Norway)

- Education *into* faith / membership / a specific religious identity
- Education *about* religions and worldviews in today's world
- Learning *from* religions, worldviews, ethics, and philosophies
- A *means to increased tolerance* and understanding between people
- A means to understand oneself, the world, and "others"
- A *safe space* for dialogue on such issues as religion and worldviews, existential and ethical question
- An opportunity for learning *how* phenomena like religions and worldviews in the world can be studied with different methods (Freathy & John 2019a, Aukland 2021)
- An opportunity to study / explore *how* religious / secular / non-binary worldviews are formed in today's world, and in history (Bråten 2021a)

Empirically speaking, RE is probably all of the above – and more. The role of scholarship in the field of RE could perhaps be framed as "contributing to developments of policy and practice", but also to develop new insights in RE as a field of research. For many working with RE research a main aim is the development of student's understanding of their own and others' religion and worldviews in the world today. Noting the complexity of contexts and embeddedness for such teaching and learnings internationally, in combination with the urgency to improve understanding of one's own and others' religion and worldviews in a complex world, this could be seen as an aim in both secular and religious frameworks, though such different context of course also impacts how this is done. Debates about what is good quality RE continues to be context sensitive.

I would like to argue that RE is not merely an area of applied science, but rather a separate field of research, though connected to other kinds of studies of religion. As "School" is a relevant field for studying religion and worldviews in today's world, RE scholarship should also be seen as contributing to debates on major issues, even such as "what is religion", "what does secular mean", and thus to the broader debate on diversity and religion.

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