

Religion & Education



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urel20

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To cite this article: Kristian Niemi (2021) Comparing Through Contrast: Reshaping Incongruence into a Mirror, Religion & Education, 48:4, 458-476, DOI: <u>10.1080/15507394.2021.1936864</u>

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2021.1936864

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Comparing Through Contrast: Reshaping Incongruence into a Mirror

Kristian Niemi 📵

ABSTRACT

The article will discuss comparative education and comparative religious education in particular. Comparative research on religious education has been a neglected field, it has been claimed. Although progress has been made, this article will suggest that comparative work tend to neglect fundamental questions about key terms that might lead to misunderstandings and confusion—friction, in short. A methodology to handle such cases will be suggested. Friction will reveal opportunities for gaining new insights about particularly the context of origin. The article is based on the authors' previous research involving cross-cultural comparison of religious education.

KEYWORDS

Comparative education; religious education; mirroring

Introduction

Some years ago, Schweitzer¹ reported that little work had thus far been made on topics of international comparative religious education (RE). Since then, the field has grown. The encyclopedic The Routledge International Handbook of Religious Education by Davis and Miroshnikova² and "Religious Education at Schools in Europe (REL-EDU) project's three volumes on RE in Central, Western, and Northern Europe³ could be mentioned in particular, as well as the "Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries" (REDCo) project⁴ and the methodology that Bråten⁵ developed specifically for comparison of RE. Recent research on comparative RE that could be mentioned is Sakaranaho,⁶ Berglund and Gent,⁷ and Niemi.⁸ Nevertheless, in 2020 Schweitzer and Schreiner, 5 together with international colleagues of RE, published a manifesto on international knowledge transfer in RE for discussion. They claimed that RE has not reached a point at which one could speak of an integrated field of research and asked for

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various kinds of contributions. 10 One such example is initiatives for methodological considerations. 11 This article purports to be contribution.12

Various national systems of RE are described in works such as Davis and Miroshnikova;¹³ Rothgangel, Klutz, and Solymár;¹⁴ Rothgangel, Skeie, and Jäggle;¹⁵ Rothgangel, Jäggle, and Schlag;¹⁶ and Jackson et al.¹⁷, exemplifying both common themes and differences. However, the studies do not seem to have considered differences in key terms such as religion. Although it might not have been necessary in these particular cases, there are scenarios where it would be essential to study the meaning of such fundamental terms as well.

In a cross-cultural comparison, similar phenomena from two or more contexts are studied. However, underlying differences in the studied phenomena of which the researcher is unaware, can lead to miscommunication, puzzlement, and confusion—friction. The purpose of this article is to outline a method for how such friction can be identified and how it can be put to active use through a shift in perspective. It is possible that it would be worthwhile to apply the method even in cases where there had not been friction, to ensure validity in comparisons. The method that will be developed will be based on Bråten¹⁸ and, in addition, use some key concepts from Jackson's interpretive approach to RE. In cases where there has been friction, the main outcome might well be new insights about the context of which the researcher is a native²⁰ rather than of the context which it is compared to. The article will also link comparative studies in RE to the field of comparative education as such and introduce terms to facilitate discussion about comparisons.²¹

Comparative education

A necessary premise for any comparative work is to compare something with something else. In classical rhetoric, a metaphor—which essentially is a comparison—has three parts. Firstly, the primum comparandum, the term to be compared; secondly, the secundum comparatum, which the comparandum is compared to; thirdly, tertium comparationis, literally grounds for comparison, that is, some common element/s between the two.²² For easy reference, primum comparandum will henceforth be referred to as comparandum, and secundus comparatum as comparatum.²³

As the clarification of terms has already established, common ground between the two phenomena, the comparandum and the comparatum, is necessary.²⁴ To undertake a comparison of phenomena that have nothing in common at all, would be nonsense; a fool's errand. However, a comparative study might initially assume a similarity (there is common ground)

that does not pan out in the end (there was no common ground). There would be friction between the comparandum and the comparatum; a cognitive dissonance. The results would, however, not be useless, the study not conducted in vain. Through a shift in perspective it could be put to use. Such a shift will be discussed further in the *Mirroring—Or comparing through contrast* section.

When comparing aspects of *education* it must be kept in mind that the phenomena of interest—teaching of a particular subject, for instance—is part of a greater whole, even if interest lies on a particular part.²⁵ National educational systems are complex. They are something more than mere bricks and mortar; more than sets of school buildings, with teachers, students, and lessons.²⁶ To grasp a particular phenomena within the system, the larger whole must also be understood. The wider culture, surrounding the teaching in question, must also be studied.²⁷ It shapes the different levels of curriculum, for various tiers or schools, which are developed by someone in certain geographical locations with a particular history. Written curricula are in turn interpreted and enacted in practices, informed by unwritten and implicit or hidden curricula.²⁸

A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and of "battles long ago." It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. It reflects, while it seeks to remedy, the failings of the national character.²⁹

It can be questioned to what extent this is possible for an outsider. Even after extensive studies of a foreign educational system it would be rare to reach a level of insight surpassing that of a native scholar, given the complexity of any such system. A scholar foreign to the system would be able to understand parts in-depth and the system as a whole superficially but would arguably struggle to reach an in-depth understanding of the system as well as its parts. This does not mean that foreign contexts should not be studied!

Comparative educational research can be conducted for several reasons. Phillips³⁰ listed several. For instance, he stated comparative work could be undertaken to investigate alternatives to what is the case in the originating context; comparisons could be used to fashion yardsticks; to gather data that could be used to hypothesize what would happen, if actions, conducted in the compared context, were undertaken in the originating context; comparative work could help foster co-operation and mutual understanding between the compared contexts; etcetera, the list goes on.³¹

In this article, focus will be on comparative work that is conducted to gain a new perspective of phenomena in the context of origin (comparandum), not of the compared (comparatum) as such. That notion is not new. Sir Michael Sadler, a pioneer in the field of comparative education,³²



said that the "practical value of studying [...] the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and to understand our own."33

Before continuing to discuss comparative work for a new perspective on the comparandum we should look at comparative work on the specific topic of RE. As we shall see, it appears some fundamental (comparative) questions have often not been asked in previous research.

Comparing RE

In 2004, Schweitzer³⁴ noted that little work had thus far been made on topics of international comparative education with regard to RE in particular. A methodology developed for the very purpose of doing cross-national comparative work on RE has been developed by Bråten.³⁵ Her methodology of four levels and three dimensions will be used in this article. It was mentioned in the previous section that the wider culture in which education is situated ought to be studied. That is the first of four dimensions studied in Bråten's methodology. She built firstly on Goodlad and Su's³⁶ four levels of curriculum: (1) society, in which different groups have different interests struggle through public debates and politics over what ought to become (2) policy. This policy is interpreted by (3) teachers and converted into the teaching that (4) students experience. Secondly, Bråten added three dimensions.³⁷ A national society does not exist in isolation, nor is it one-dimensional but needs to be recognized as multilayered. Educational systems, outlined by levels (1) to (4), are influenced by (a) supranational phenomena, such as global warming, migration, capitalism etcetera. There is a (b) national context and a (c) subnational or local context, which needs to be considered. The three dimensions and four levels are illustrated in Figure 1.

In the following paragraphs, relevant aspects of some works on comparative RE will briefly be analyzed, beginning with Schweitzer who in a later work³⁹ described five levels which an international comparison ought to include. They are as follows: (1) the level of legal provisions; (2) the political level; (3) the level of everyday schooling; (4) the level of culture; and (5) the academic level. In the context of this article, Schweitzer was primarily interested in how RE in the compared countries is controlled and influenced, and by whom, through which institutions.

If we relate Schweitzer's levels of interest to Bråten's methodology, it can be illustrated as in Figure 2. It is clear that Schweitzer is primarily interested in the institutional level.⁴⁰ Of note with regards to the present article is that the meaning of *religion* is presupposed, not investigated.

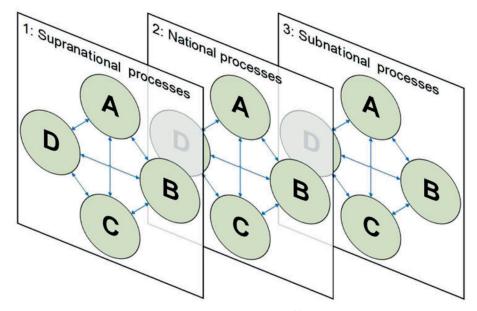


Figure 1. Diagrammatical model of Bråten's methodology.³⁸

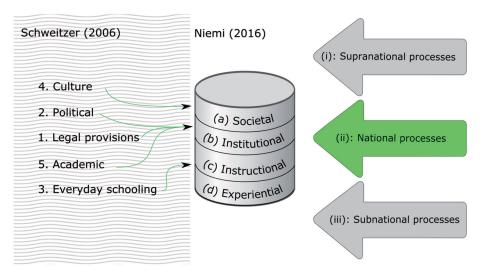


Figure 2. Schweitzer's levels of interest, ordered to facilitate the comparison, framed in (author's adaptation of) Bråten's methodology.

An on-going, comprehensive project on comparative RE, is REL-EDU, which up until today has produced three volumes on Central Europe, ⁴¹ Western Europe, ⁴² and Northern Europe. ⁴³ The setup of the project is that 13 fundamental questions are asked of each of the nations included and are answered by scholars from respective context. When categorized into the

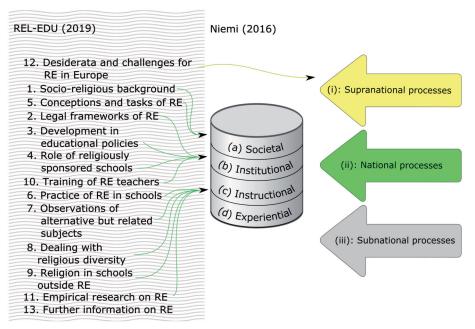


Figure 3. Religious Education at Schools in Europe's (REL-EDU's) 13 questions, ordered to facilitate the comparison, framed in (author's adaptation of) Bråten's methodology.

adapted figure of Bråten's methodology (Figure 3), we can see that, like in the case of Schweitzer, there is a strong focus on the institutional level. In addition, REL-EDU puts more emphasis on school practice, the instructional and experiental level. Although the socio-religious background of the contries are studied, the fundamental question of what religion means in respective country is not asked.

Another ambitious research project is REDCo. The project was active from 2006 to 2009 and involved 12 project leaders and 30 younger researchers from Estonia, Russia, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, England, France, and Spain. 44 The projects main research questions 45 are listed in Figure 4. Whereas the previous projects had a nation-wise focus—asking common question to various national contexts—REDCo clearly distinguishes itself in having a strong focus on the supranational dimension. More specifically, on the European. Using Bråten's terminology, one could say that the core question of REDCo, how religions and values can contribute to dialogue or tension in Europe, is a supranational issue that the project researches through investigating national cases.

The project leader, Weisse, mentioned that certain terms was a central problem as the content of questions sometimes "did not lend themselves to a direct translation"⁴⁶ as exact equivalents were lacking in other languages. It thus seems that the REDCo project was aware of terminological or

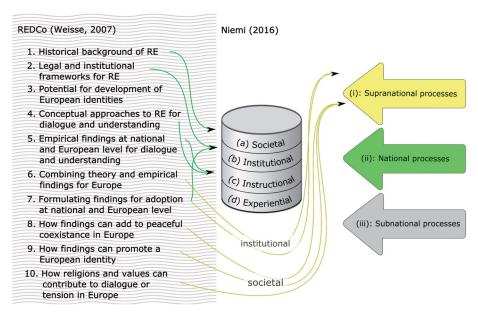


Figure 4. Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries's (REDCo's) research questions for the initial phase (1-3), main phase (4-6), last phase (7-9) and core question (10), framed in (author's adaptation of) Bråten's methodology.

linguistic problems but, nevertheless, it was assumed that the meaning of the key term religion was shared between contexts.

As was mentioned earlier, to compare, three things are needed—comparandum, a phenomena that will be compared to a second phenomena, comparatum; and something they have in common, tertium comparationis.

The studies mentioned above result in a list of various ways that RE is organized in different contexts. Variables include focus on learning about religion, learning from religion, or both. We find that RE can be structured as confessional, nonconfessional, weakly confessional, or some other middle ground. RE classes could primarily be dealing with a particular religion, or concern "the World Religions"—the list of which belong to the category vary somewhat. RE teaching could be for all students in a class (integrated teaching), or they could be taught in separate classrooms depending on denomination (separate teaching). It could be mandatory for all, or free to opt out. A particular RE in a given national context would be a combination of the aforementioned variables.⁴⁷

Another result of comparative work, is that the shape and form of RE in a particular national context is undoubtedly a result of the historical context of a country. 48 RE is affected by the religious landscape of the country; by how religion as such is viewed; by the relation between state and religion, etcetera. 49 For instance, if a country has had a Christian majority, with marginal groups of religious minorities, the RE of the country would

often be constructed to fit this religious majority but not the minorities. Swedish RE could be taken as an example. Historically, Sweden has been rather homogeneously Protestant, although there have been Protestant denominations since the 19th century. From the 16th century to the year 2000, the Lutheran church ("Church of Sweden") was the state church of Sweden. RE in Sweden can be traced back to 1686. From then up until 1882 biblical history and Catechesis formed the core of the curriculum. In 1919, the subject changed into teaching about Christianity, and in 1962 it became teaching about religion in general, which is still the case today.⁵⁰ Despite the changes, it could be argued that although other religions are currently taught, they are most often taught from a Christian perspective. Swedish society is so "marinated" in Lutheranism that it is the norm for religion as such and creates the framework through which other religious are understood.⁵¹ If, on the other hand, a country had large religious minorities historically, one might expect an RE that also caters to these minorities. Finnish RE would be an example; although the majority of the population is Protestant Lutheran, the Orthodox community has been historically strong. RE needed to cater to the Orthodox community as well as the Lutheran, as both Lutheran and Orthodox Christianity are national churches of Finland. In 2014, there were 11 different curricula for different religious communities as well as a secular alternative, Ethics.⁵² Austria is another example of the latter approach, with a pillarized RE.⁵³ However, Austria and Finland differ with regard to organization and responsibility of RE.

The impact of the historical context of a country, and more specifically the impact of the religious makeup, is something we will return to below, in the Which "religion"? section.

Discussing the examples above can be fruitful as variations are revealed, as are particularities and commonalities. The purpose of including Figures 2 to 4 was to illustrate that there has been a focus on practical levels (instructional and experiental) as well as institutional. The societal level has been studied to a lesser extent, in the context of RE. It has been presupposed that a lexical equivalence for certain fundamental features of RE is sufficient guarantee that the objects studied are similar enough for a comparison to take place.⁵⁴ However, on closer inspection, the meaning might not be shared, which can have extensive implications.

Which "religion"?

Scholars have noted that the meaning and use of terminology is of particular importance when doing research across national, cultural, denominational, and religious boundaries.⁵⁵ Schweitzer noted that in the United Kingdom there is a distinction between *religious nurture* and *RE*, whereas such distinction might not be made in other countries. Another example⁵⁶ mentioned is *spiritual* and *religious*, which have different connotations in, for example, the languages of German and English. *Confessional* and *denominational* are other examples.⁵⁷ In part, difficulties can arise because of unnuanced translations because of a lack of linguistic skills⁵⁸ or not having enough knowledge of the compared culture to understand what a translated term means. We will return to another example in the next section.

Despite a sensitivity to differing meanings of certain terms, *religion* itself has not been critically examined in most of the aforementioned works, although it could be said to lie at the core of the comparison—for what is RE without religion?

Religion is a notoriously difficult subject to define. For the purposes of this article, it is not necessary, nor would it perhaps even be desirable, to arrive at a definition. It is sufficient to note that there are various understandings. Saler⁵⁹ noted that religion and the labels for the various religious traditions, should be understood as "folk categories," which have developed in societies over a long period of time. In their respective context, and popular use, they are taken for granted and function well. Religion "is still widely if somewhat loosely used by historians and social scientists as if it were a genuine cross-cultural category." I would add researchers of comparative RE to the list, if not already included under "social scientists," as this is arguably what we can see in the previously discussed comparative RE research. The term *religion* has been assumed to mean the same thing.

The structure of RE necessarily reflects the context in which it was developed. This would also include the understanding of religion in the context. This means that differences of RE can go deeper than the mere structure of RE. The point might become more clear if looking at a comparison of RE, where the comparatum and the comparandum are, on the face of it, more different than within Europe—yet, with that example in mind, we will return to Europe and see that the point might be valid there as well.

Mirroring—Or comparing through contrast

Both the REL-EDU series mentioned, and the *The Routledge International Handbook of Religious Education* are examples of descriptions and discussions of RE in individual countries, from the perspective of each country, respectively.

Schweitzer⁶¹ suggested multiple perspectives are needed for a systematic comparison. The research should include "some kind of mutual two-way perspectivity or mutual comparison".⁶² One way of conducting such research is when researchers from two different contexts work in tandem.

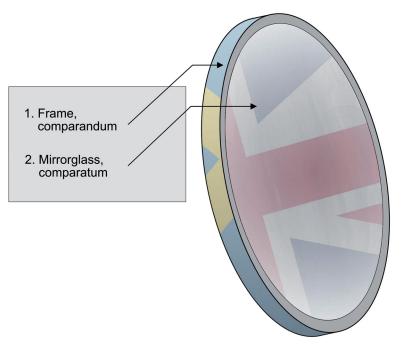


Figure 5. Comparandum (Swedish religious education [RE]) and comparatum (RE in the United Kingdom).

An example of such research is the work by Berglund and Gent. In Non-Confessional RE: An "Our'anic Education and Intercultural Perspective," neither context is solely comparatum or comparandum, but material from both contexts are used to elucidate a common theme: Muslim supplementary education, or supplementary Islamic RE (sIRE). In Bråten's⁶³ framework, one could say that sIRE is the supranational issue which is investigated on national levels. However, Berglund and Gent⁶⁴ allowed their respective context to mirror each other. Thus, Berglund's originating context is Sweden, that is, sIRE in Sweden is her comparandum and sIRE in the United Kingdom is the comparatum. The United Kingdom is Gent's originating context, that is his comparandum whereas Swedish supplementary Islamic education is his comparatum. Berglund's perspective could thus be illustrated as in Figure 5; in Gent's case it would be the opposite.

In this fashion—although they did not perceive of using mirroring as a method as such, themselves—they were able to use their respective point of origin, and their own preconceived notions originating from their respective comparatum to create friction. Gent expected Swedish supplementary Islamic education classes to appear in a certain fashion, because that was his experience from the United Kingdom. He took that for granted. However, when interviewing Swedish children attending sIRE, it became

clear that it was different. The Swedish context, and the Swedish school milieu overall, seemed to have also affected Muslim supplementary RE. For instance, there were no school uniforms; the classes were mixed with regards to gender; they did not sit in a circle on the floor, and so on. The characteristics listed above were typically found in everyday school as well as in the sIRE classrooms observed in the United Kingdom. However, they were absent in both everyday Swedish classrooms, and in Swedish sIRE.

I would describe the above as *friction*; there was a difference between the comparatum (sIRE in the United Kingdom) and the comparandum (sIRE in Sweden). This difference was made visible as the the preconceived notion (sIRE—classes typically look like this, comparatum) clashed with the results (sIRE—classes do not work like that, comparandum). There was friction between the researcher's preconceived notions and the material. This friction illuminated something interesting: there was a contextual difference. The researchers could follow it up and explore the matter further.

Here, we can borrow some of the key concepts in Robert Jackson's interpretative approach to RE⁶⁵ (more specifically, interpretation and reflexivity). Jackson developed interpretative RE as a way of teaching religion in English and Welsh schools,⁶⁶ but it has also been used as a research tool—not least in the ambitious REDCo project.⁶⁷ Previous use of the interpretive approach as a research tool has been for pedagogic development or a way of framing interviews or analyzing observations. Here, I am proposing that the concepts of interpretation and reflexivity can also be used when comparing fundamental terms of RE.

Interpretation in the interpretive approach is to compare and contrast concepts of the learner (e.g., pupil) and the subject at hand (e.g., concepts from a religious tradition or other RE content).⁶⁸ *Reflexivity* in the interpretive approach means that the learner (e.g., pupil) reviews their understanding of their own way of life.⁶⁹

In this article, *interpretation* means to compare and contrast concepts of the comparandum and comparatum. However, the concepts studied are not arbitrary but precisely those which caused friction. *Reflexivity* means to reexamine how terms are used in the context of the comparandum as well as in the context of the comparatum.

In the case of Berglund and Gent's⁷⁰ research, they did investigate the friction reflexively and interpretively. What was thus uncovered were new insights about their respective originating context. The comparandum was mirrored in the comparatum. The research project did not only have a one-directional focus, "from Sweden to (understand) the United Kingdom", but a bi-directional investigation of both Sweden and UK, thanks to the two researchers working in tandem (Figure 6).

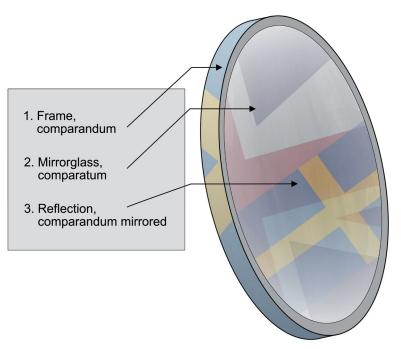


Figure 6. Comparandum (Swedish religious education [RE]), Comparatum (RE in the United Kingdom), and new insights in the mirror-image.

Another example of reflexive, interpretative, comparative research is by myself. In previous research, my original purpose (2016) was to study RE in India in and of itself. As research progressed, it became clear that the questions posed to the Indian context were perceived differently than intended. There was indeed friction.⁷¹ Instead of ignoring the friction, it was put to use: The friction illuminated the fact that the study had been framed in a different context, Sweden, with underlying assumptions and conceptualizations, that differed from the context at hand (India). There was a shift of perspective where Sweden was re-framed as both being the comparandum and the subject of investigation in the mirror constructed by the comparatum. 72 It could be illustrated in Figure 7. This enabled characteristic traits of the originating context, Sweden, to appear. The friction was related to a different understand of the term religion itself, and thus the reframing or shift in perspective also necessitated a shift from originally studying curricular levels (2), institutional, (3) instructional, as well as (4) experiental to more consider (1) the social and cultural level to a larger extent. This resulted in the second article. 73 Arguably, what is most interesting here is not what is learnt about 'the other' (Indian RE), but rather of the point of origin (Swedish RE).

Part of the results was that that religion as a phenomenon is understood differently in the two contexts.⁷⁴ And that this in turn affects what secular means and where the line is drawn between the sacred and the profane.

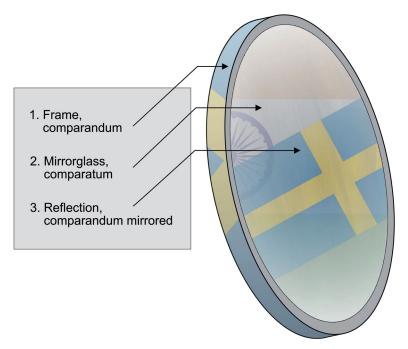


Figure 7. Comparandum (Swedish religious education [RE]), Comparatum (Indian RE), and new insights in the mirror-image.

Sweden, colored by a Christian, Protestant view of what is and what is not religious, draws the line in a way that is influenced by a Christian, Protestant understanding of religion. Religion is primarily understood as belief and there is an emphasis on words. Practices can be deemed secular ("song") or religious ("hymn") depending on whether certain beliefs are tied to it, or if certain words (e.g., God) are used in the practice. In the Indian context there is, in contrast, a prevalent understanding of religion which focuses on action rather than faith. The term religion is often translated as "dharma," but in the context it has rather different connotations. Dharma could also be translated as "duties," and an even more apt term might be varṇashramadharma, a term denoting a person's dharma (duties), which depend on a person's position in society, age, but also gender, country in which he or she is born, and so on.

The above exemplifies two different ways of understanding religion; one focusing on right belief, the other of right doing; or *orthopraxy* and *orthodoxy*. Being "marinated" in a culture, where one or the other of the aforementioned ways of conceiving religion is the norm, affects how one views religion. In a study on threshold concepts for students of religion in Sweden, who would be most familiar with an orthodoxic view of religion, it was argued that understanding religious traditions that focus on orthopraxy can be a challenge for them. The opposite would probably be the case in a culture marinated with an orthopraxic view of religion.

Conclusions

Through previous research using mirroring as a method, 81 it has been argued that religion is conceptualized in a particular way in Sweden, very different from how religion is conceived of in India. In the Discussion, characteristic traits of Sweden were stressed, and it would thus be likely that the results pertain to Sweden in particular. Can it really be taken for granted that religion is the same in other European, Christian countries? Is religion as a general phenomenon the same in Greece, Italy, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and so on?

Differing conceptualizations of religion would naturally have implications for the entire system of RE. To name but one, it would affect what secular would mean in the context. Given an understanding of secular informed by the French notion of laïcité, which is the case in Sweden, where secular education would mean distance from religion. But distance from what in particular? In the Swedish Lutheran case, it would be distance from beliefs.⁸² In the case of India, both religion and secular means something else, which also affects how religion is handled in schools overall.⁸³ What about other European countries? Is it the same religion, the same secular (in the cases of secular RE, that is)?

Although the REL-EDU project does study the socioreligious background of the countries included in the study, it does not study the impact it might have on the notion of religion itself. Of primary interest in the project are the frameworks of RE (four out of 13 questions) and RE practice (five out of 13 questions). REDCo does include historical background of RE in their studies, but not of religion itself. Schweitzer⁸⁴ and Bråten⁸⁵ did discuss differing understandings of some terms, but not if religion itself is understood in a similar manner, in the contexts studied.

I would suggest that in cross-cultural comparative work, there will be puzzling situations, confusion—small or large—and they are opportunities for a reflexive shift. Such shifts were described above in the research of Niemi⁸⁶ and Berglund and Gent.⁸⁷ After the shift, the context of comparatum becomes a mirror in which particularities of the comparandum can appear.

If there is to be international knowledge transfer⁸⁸ in the field of RE, the impact of differences with regards to fundamental terms (like religion) needs to be investigated. Cross-cultural research requires sensitivity to friction which can reveal such differences.

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Notes

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