



# SHIFTING BORDERS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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There are borders, sometimes strong, sometimes invisible, and borders may go between countries, religions, and people. The borders can give shape, or connect, or they may separate. Often all these functions work simultaneously. Sometimes the borders may be floating, changing and shifting. In spite of all the features of borders, they are often little focused upon. Instead we see what either side is. By drawing attention specifically to borders, we wanted, at the XIII Nordic Conference on Religious Education ‘Shifting borders in Religious Education’, held at the University of Tartu, Estonia, from 15-18 June 2015, to inspire a search for new knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This special issue is compiled from papers presented there.

The conference hosted religious education researchers, PhD students and practitioners from universities and research centres of twelve countries who contributed to exploring the conference theme. Altogether, four plenary lectures, 34 paper sessions, six open forum sessions and three symposia were held during the conference. These explored a wide variety of topics related to the conference’s theme of shifting borders in religious education (hereafter RE): between secular and religious, between past and present, between research and practice, between different methodological schools of research, between different school subjects, between different geopolitical contexts. We asked questions like: What kind of challenges are to be met in RE due to post-secularisation, digitalisation, terrorism? How to foster dialogue, make use of symbols, urban religious landscapes, popular culture and balance textbook religion with lived religion in an RE context? How do young people coming from different traditions and from different countries perceive religion in their lives, and is

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this changing with age? What is ethical and religious literacy, and how can we measure fluid concepts related to religion, worldview and values? How is the past reproduced in today's practices, textbooks and attitudes?

This special issue gives only a tiny selection of topics discussed during the conference. Nine articles comprise three sections. The first section deals with subject RE on different kinds of borders. Spatial dimensions of lived religion often cross geographical borders between countries<sup>2</sup>. How does the proximity to geographical borders, with attendant tensions between regionalisation and globalisation, affect the way religion is dealt in schools? Jenny Berglund presents a cross-disciplinary research project focusing on RE in four territorial border areas around the Baltic Sea. She discusses whether a close relation to a territorial neighbour implies that the culture and religion of the territorial *Other* is taken into consideration in teaching.<sup>3</sup>

Religious, cultural and normative diversity are present all over the Europe. This calls for fair and accurate teaching about religions, neutrality, and respect for freedom of religion.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as Peter Strandbrink elegantly puts it: "Political and social realities seem to constrain religious and civic education in ways that create significant challenges for the post-normative posture".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> David **Thurfjell** and Peter **Jackson** (Eds.), *Religion on the borders: New challenges in the academic study of religion*, Södertörn studies on religion, 1 (Stockholm: Södertörn University, 2009); Roger W. **Stump**, *The geography of religion. Faith, place and space* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Thomas **Lundén**, "The spatiality of religion" – *Crossings & Crosses: Borders, Educations and Religions in Northern Europe*. Eds. Jenny Berglund, Thomas Lundén and Peter Strandbrink (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015), 191-211.

<sup>3</sup> See also a book presenting more results of this project: Jenny **Berglund**, Thomas **Lundén** and Peter **Strandbrink** (Eds.) *Crossings & Crosses: Borders, Educations and Religions in Northern Europe* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. John **Keast** (Ed.), *Religious diversity and intercultural education: A reference book for schools* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2007); **OSCE**, *The Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion or belief* (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007); **Council of Europe**, *Draft recommendation on the religious dimension of intercultural education: Principles, objectives and teaching approaches* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2007); Robert **Jackson**, *Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Peter **Strandbrink**, "Unpacking postnormativity in religious and civic education" – *Crossings & Crosses: Borders, Educations and Religions in Northern Europe*. Eds. Jenny Berglund, Thomas Lundén and Peter Strandbrink (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015), 155-169.

Two papers debate confessional RE in pluralistic and secularised societies. The clash between the religious background of students and a confessional approach to RE in the Belgian context, is discussed in Leni Franken's paper. She argues that current practice of a compulsory confessional approach to RE undermines freedom of religion and education; she argues for a shift to non-confessional RE, which "is, within a context of secularization, religious pluralism and growing religious extremism, an absolute requirement". In the last paper of the first section, Dzintra Iliško raises a theoretical discussion about the need for (confessional) RE to open up for students' alternative meanings, perspectives and truth claims, in order to deconstruct 'grand narratives', and their ontological and epistemological foundations. The article elaborates on a number of understandings of solidarity and suggests how RE may enhance solidarity in turbulent times.

The second section includes empirical studies of teachers. Lars Samuelsson and Niclas Lindström present a study about value clash between a group of Swedish student teachers' personal values and the values established by national educational guidelines, which they are supposed to convey to their pupils. Their article points to the problem of hegemonic normativity of values held by mainstream social groups, viewed as 'common sense' or the general 'consensus', and perceived as the only sensible way of seeing the world.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the question is not only a discrepancy between legal requirements and personal values, but also about the ability to question dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate, and to think about possible alternatives.

The article by Sören Dalevi and Kristian Niemi also deals with teachers' professional reflection. Critical reflection on teaching practices is important for all teachers, and especially for teachers dealing with sensitive issues of plurality.<sup>7</sup> The teachers' personal assumptions, values, beliefs

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio **Gramsci**, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Penelope **Eckert**, Sally **McConell-Ginet**, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43 argue that the most effective form of domination is the assimilation of the wider population into one's worldview.

<sup>7</sup> About the teachers' professional reflection e.g. Celes Raenee **Rayford**, *Reflective Practice: The Teacher in the Mirror*, UNLV Theses, Paper 5 (Las Vegas, Nev.: University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2010) and on teachers' identity e.g. Katariina **Stenberg**, *Working with identities – promoting student teachers' professional development*, Thesis (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2011).

and biases may affect decisions they make about curriculum and the way they teach. Dalevi and Niemi examine critically the role of RE didactics in the Swedish context. They find RE didactics in Sweden to be mainly defined by the national curriculum, “instead of being a critical voice contributing to a debate and offering alternative approaches to teachers”.

Changes in educational practices are multidimensional, complex and difficult to study. Often empirical studies of classroom practices are critical to the ways religion is dealt with in schools. However, we do not often find clear proposals for good practice and alternative ways of teaching and learning, developed by researchers. Instead the proposed recommendations tend to be vague and general, and therefore difficult to translate and apply to everyday teaching practices. In recent years there has been a growing number of action research studies that fill in this gap by engaging practising teachers in new ways of teaching religion.<sup>8</sup> In her article, Anuleena Kimanen presents Finnish research, where teachers were not only studied, but also took part as researchers. This was done in order to improve pupils’ skills needed for peaceful dialogue between people of different worldviews. She also discusses the conditions that may enable and improve such a dialogue.

The third section includes studies concerned with crossing borders between the secular and the religious, as these are represented in the life-worlds of young people. If studied in traditional ways, it appears that religion among young people in Europe is losing its importance. However, any ‘open’ approach to religious education needs to be sensitive to the personal views and commitments of students. Thus, Erika Willander, in her thesis, urges us not to overlook the way people understand the sacred, the ways in which they understand their own religiosity and the fact that their religious affiliation, belief and practice do not fit established expectations.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Joyce **Miller**, Kevin **O’Grady** and Ursula **McKenna** (Eds.), *Religion in Education: Innovation in International Research* (Routledge, New York and London: Routledge, 2013); Ursula **McKenna**, Julia **Ipgrave** and Robert **Jackson**, *Inter Faith Dialogue by Email in Primary Schools* (Münster: Waxmann, 2008); Kevin **O’Grady**, “Action research and the interpretive approach to religious education” – *Religion & Education*, 40/1 (2013), 62-77. Action research is also used in teacher education, e.g. Kari **Flornes**, *An action research approach to initial teacher education in Norway* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Erika **Willander**, *What Counts as Religion in Sociology? The Problem of Religiosity in Sociological Methodology* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2014).

Something similar comes from Gunnar J. Gunnarsson and his colleagues who have studied young people in Iceland's multicultural society. Their mixed method study indicates that, although the daily life of the young people is secularised, many of them still find comfort in its religious practices, in times of difficulties, for example. The article deals with forms of de-secularisation and the generally positive attitudes held by young people towards ethnic and religious diversity.

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro through a questionnaire examines young Buddhists' practice of bowing to their parents in relation to their attitudes to a number of other, different practices. Through this the paper intends to study the border between the private and public domain, when the maintenance of the practice of bowing to one's parents is linked to attitudes on different actions, such as the use of alcohol. This quantitative study was conducted among teenagers, self-identifying as Buddhists in Britain, and including both converts and non-converts. Thanissaro argues that bowing to parents, a practice within the home, has relevance for stances taken in relation to societal issues, as well as deserves to be considered as an aspect of the transmission of Buddhist religiosity to new generations. In this respect, the paper represents an effort to see how practices within the home may cross borders into the public domain. Thanissaro's quantitative study focuses on attitudes, whereas the critical discussion by Seyla Benhabib (2006) on the private and the public in the case of the young French women who went to school veiled, to take another example, focuses on agency as a way of changing the understanding of a religious (or political) symbol in the public sphere.<sup>10</sup>

The special issue concludes with a paper by Fedor Kozyrev examining the paradigm shift towards subjectivity both in RE practice and research, thus displaying intersections and shifting borders within RE itself. "Rehabilitation of metaphysics, awareness of intentionality and wider understanding of rationality are parts of the process stimulating a more creative approach to religious studies and teaching", argues Kozyrev. This paper offers a framework for conceptualizing a humanitarian methodology, presenting its foundations, strategies and even examples of how it may work in the field of religious and values education research. The author argues for

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<sup>10</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51-61.

a position where a critical methodological stance is upheld, over against a subjectivism that could put the free and critical quality of science at risk. He exemplifies this from the ways factor analysis can provide a diversity of pictures which are in need of interpretation – as with scientific work in general.

The editors hope that readers will agree with them that the various explorations of borders explored in the articles in this issue contribute significantly to an open, critical discussion of what constitutes legitimate claims within research on religious and values education.