

## Why should we study religions?

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Religiosity is not only a personal choice, but a social phenomenon and highly related to a person's relationships with her/his macro social context (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Most of the studies pointed out the role of the family and religious education in the development of religious identity (Armet, 2009; Özorak, 1989).

“From the first, education was the creature of religion” (Murphy, 1968), schools were a part of religious institutions and most of the lecturers of schools were religious officers. With the modern era, the impact of the religion on the public sphere decreased and religion became “an epiphenomenal force in society” (Fox, 2006). States separated themselves from religion, and started to control the education and the information taught in the classrooms.

While religious institutions were controlling education and religions were taught without hesitation. However, today, it is a complicated question and part of a big debate. RE, especially teaching about different religions is a sensitive topic. Easier said than done. “It demands sensitivity in approach, across different topics and disciplines, and there can be no single formula or curriculum” (Marshall, 2018, p. 188). Thus, the relevance of RE in today's world and how it should be realized is still a popular topic in many societies.

Religious education is related to “systematic instruction concerning a specific faith or practices that are categorized as religious. It encompasses a multitude of concepts, institutional settings, and national heritages” (Gross, 2011, p. 257). RE comprises a wide range of topics and offers an excellent framework for students to explore a variety of issues related to religions, worldviews, ethics, art, philosophy, human rights, citizenship, and democracy (Council of Europe, 2014).

Countries that RE is part of their curriculum in public schools follow different regulations and there are different taxonomies or models of RE. The instruction of religion can be education into religion, education about religion or education from religion (Schreiner, 2002). Hull (n.d.) describes main types of RE by referring to Michael Grimmit: learning religion, learning about religion, and learning from religion. Learning religion is the situation where a single religious tradition is taught. The teachers are expected to be believers in the religion themselves, and the object of education is to make students to believe in the religion or the strength the commitment. Thus, a specific religious tradition controls the curriculum. Another possible way is learning about religion, and this approach understands that instead of religion being taught from the inside, religion is now taught, as it were, from the outside. This kind of education tends to appear as a reaction against mono-religious approaches, and it plays a significant role in religious freedom and the prevention of religious intolerance as it empowers the student with critical skills for interpreting religious phenomena, it tends to release students from unexamined beliefs and helps them to break down the stereotypes of other religious traditions. The third approach, learning from religion, has emerged because of the limitations of the first two. Through this kind of RE, students are not expected to practice the religion that they were taught, the distance between the pupils and the religious content is strictly maintained. Students learn about the contribution of religion to their moral and spiritual development. The aim is to make the students aware of different perspectives and to teach them to appreciate the values from another view.

Sterkens and Yusuf (2015) distinguish two general models of RE based on the differences in their social context, normative basis and pedagogical aspects. The first one is mono-religious

model and this model aims to construct a particular religious identity in line with the one's religion. This model focuses primarily on one religion and students are taught deeply in their faith. However, this model does not necessarily disregard other religions and can introduce another religious tradition and discuss it even from the perspective of one's own religion. The second model, inter-religious model, focuses on religious identity formation through dialogue and do not prioritize teaching of a particular religion. The goal here is to develop a particular religious identity in dialogue with other religious traditions. In this model religious pluralism is acknowledged. "Cognitively, the model aims to critically analyse knowledge of the beliefs, values and rituals of one's own and other religions through dialogue. Affectively, the inter-religious model aims at teaching effective communication between one's own religion and other religious traditions. (Sterkens & Yusuf, 2015, p. 51-52).

Conflicts over religion in school are neither new nor pertain to a specific country. There has been a worldwide debate about the position of religious education in school curriculums, the mandatory character of religious education, the responsibility for designing curricula and the content and learning models of RE (Diez de Velasco 2007; Moulin 2015; Dilek, 2022). The arguments against RE mainly question its necessity. White (2004) questions if it is justifiable making RE compulsory in a secular country like Britain. He argues that there were two main justifications for RE. the first one was to support the moral values underlying democracy, and the second one was related with understanding and respecting other religions and beliefs. For him, both justifications are not strong enough today, they are faded (White, 2004, p. 151). Some studies claim that RE does not recognize the perspectives of minority religious groups (Head, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010).

It also can be observed that RE in many public education systems in different countries have seen a dramatic decline. While, in some countries, religion is totally disappeared from the curriculum, some countries teach only one single religious tradition. And the result includes "a sharp decline in 'religious literacy' among the population" (Marshall, 2018, p. 187). This can cause a problem in especially plural societies as communities suffer if the communities do not understand each other properly.

We know that religious diversity is a fact of life in many countries. Today's children and young people are living in a society that becoming richer day by day in its religious and cultural diversity. They are facing with plurality of values because of individualization, detraditionalization and mediatization (p. 4, van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020). Moreover, the contemporary and sometimes historical tensions in many cases have described religious diversity as a risk. Hedges and Halafoff (2015) argue that it is education that can teach communities the benefits of respecting diversity and at the same time, it ensures that religious rights do not threaten the rights of others. RE "helps young people to understand when it is good and right to compromise one's beliefs and values and when it is good and right to stand firm against attempts to force compromise. This sort of knowledge and understanding is crucial if young people are to know how they can positively shape their own future and the future of society and their world" (p. 7, Education Scotland, 2014).

So, it is crucial to address within the classroom the topics like the claims of truth that religions make or the questions that religions try to answer.

Thus, having a curriculum that reflects the adherence to embracing inclusion, equality and diversity will provide environment that people from all faiths and people with no faith will be respected. It will contribute who we are and where we belong to explore and share our own worldviews, beliefs and values, and as well have them challenged by others. Moreover, it will allow us to see ourselves in relation to others.

RE has a key role in providing an opportunity to explore values and beliefs and, that is why, in preparing youth for future. This feature of RE in developing the beliefs and moral values of young people by motivating them to learn with personal reflection is crucial. The report of

Education Scotland (2014) claimed that Religious and Moral Education, when it is delivered well, “supports all children and young people to develop their viewpoints, beliefs and moral values through motivating learning experiences with a strong focus on higher order thinking skills and space for personal reflection” (p. 1, Education Scotland, 2014). Nkomazana (2007) advocated that RE can contribute the development of children’s values and moral standards. Religion can positively affect the development of a mentally, socially and religiously balanced school going youth, and societal challenges could be addressed by RE in schools.

Another question is if teaching religion in state schools is compatible with the religious neutrality of states? Jürgen Habermas (Calhoun, Mendieta & VanAntwerpen, 2013) indicated that religions can be helpful for democracies by positively supporting the willingness to obey the rules and respecting the democratic decisions. RE can play a vital role in educating citizens especially “in terms of understanding various aspects of social plurality in relation to the experience of individual students” (Jackson, 2003, p. 19). Löffler (2020) argues that democracies should not take the risk of religious illiteracy because of the cultural importance of religion and its unclear effects on the stability of democracy.

Religious minds can be destructive for the democratic values especially if there is a combination of devoted religiosity and illiteracy. Olivier Roy (Roy, 2010) emphasized that religious extremism is connected with religious ignorance. It is empirically proofed that those who commit terrorist attacks mostly did not learn their religion in their family, rather, they learned religions from inauthentic sources. Those who learned authentic religion through RE are more likely to be moderate.

Thus, it is necessary to have a certain amount of religious literacy “not only to better understand religious backgrounds of political behavior and to detect inappropriate utilizations, misgivings, and misunderstandings of religion, but also to cultivate an awareness of the positive contributions that many religious traditions can offer for democratic processes” (p. 120, Löffler, 2020). Even in secular states, there is a need for a serious and authentic information about religions. Moreover, a certain level of religious literacy is not only politically useful, also necessary for us to understand ourselves. It seems that the most effective way for the states to provide such literacy is providing RE in schools. In this way, religions can be a powerful supporter of democratic states and might help to create citizens who accepts democratic values “by fostering attitudes like mutual respect, understanding and differentiating standpoints, cultural openness, civilized and nonviolent solution of conflicts, and solidarity, among other values” (p. 125, Löffler, 2020).

Teaching religion in schools is an appropriate way to teach inter-religious tolerance. Referring to inter-religious conflict in Indonesia, Lynn (2014) claims that the best rationale for RE was not theology but the awareness of the possible harms that can occur if people are not exposed to other religions. The silence about religion can handicap students’ ability of developing religious tolerance and autonomy. As there are many people who determine their views on personal and professional lives, politics based on their religions, it is hard to achieve autonomy overall if people are not autonomous over their religious beliefs. It is necessary to have RE if religious tolerance or autonomy is valuable “Students are more likely to tolerate other beliefs when they experience to some extent the force that other beliefs have upon their adherents. A religious education must encourage students to develop sympathetic imagination for the beliefs they consider. It should not only expose students to the content of other beliefs, but must make students aware of the claims to beauty and truth that make various religions compelling to their believers” (p. 183, Lester, 2007).

The question of how studying religious and non-religious views can contribute to the development of students is still there. Focusing on developing appropriate approaches for teaching religion, Robert Jackson’s report, Signposts, advices to policy makers, schools (including teachers, senior managers and governors) and teacher trainers “on clarifying the

terms used in this form of education; developing competences for teaching and learning, and working with different didactical approaches; creating a “safe space” for moderated student-to-student dialogue in the classroom; helping students to analyse media representations of religions; discussing non-religious world views alongside religious perspectives; handling human rights issues relating to religion and belief; and linking schools (including schools of different types) to one another and to wider communities and organisations” (Jackson 2014, p. 130). He sees that “Understanding religions and non-religious convictions is seen as an essential aspect of intercultural understanding. Understanding cultural diversity is viewed as a dimension of education of democratic citizenship and human rights education, which are closely inter-related and mutually supportive” (Jackson 2014, p. 15).

RE should be presented to the learners in an understandable paradigm if the aim is to promote values. Roux (1999) says that religious content can be used for this aim and it can set examples of behavior. “Religious content and values can be incorporated and specific religious values in communities may be identified” (Cornelia Roux, 1999, p. 116).

There is a need for an educational system that addresses the religious intolerance through RE and religious culture in schools. RE should enable young people to learn how to tolerate and even respect those who follow different religions. Moreover, it should attract students’ attention by discussing everyday issues and bravely challenge students with the big questions about the philosophy of religions. Acknowledging the differences and uniqueness of different religions, and respecting the diversity, RE can provide a peaceful coexistence. “The aim of such education would be to foster understanding of religious difference beyond stereotypes, critical analysis of religious similarities and differences and interrogation of conventional ritualistic behaviour, enabling students to practise empathy and negotiate with the perspectives of others and integrate such perspectives into their own actions and reflections” (Lynn. 2014, p. 495).

Studying religions can force use to challenge our assumptions, and make us to think or question what we as true. We realize our lack of knowledge about others, “holy ignorance” (Roy, 2010, p. 117). RE (James Michael Lee as cited in Faller, 2020) can play a prophetic role in the society as RE “visions a broad sweeping future and then makes that future happen earlier than it would have happened if religious education were not there” (p. 173, Faller, 2020). It is an attempt to keep education open to the unforeseen possibilities of humanity (Gabriel Moran as cited in Faller, 2020). This kind of definitions assigning RE a significant role in today’s world, where there are global economic, social and ecological crises.

We argue that the issues like globalization, migration and the ensuing diversity showed us that there is a need inter- religious education. The study of religion is becoming more prominent as countries around the world continue to connect with one another. Religion plays a large role in each society, and understanding each one is important when building relations with countries and the people who populate them. A broad consensus on this necessity is already developed around the importance of such education (Gordon & Arenstein, 2017). With the increase in the religious, cultural and linguistic diversity in the urban areas of many countries, different rationale for RE emerged. Nowadays, people encounter with followers of other religions not only in public sphere but also at home. Thus, it is crucial to study religions to know the unfamiliar. The personal reasons to learn about different religions include: “to deal with personal feelings of anxiety about the unfamiliar; to avoid personal embarrassment in dealing with others; and to live knowledge ably, comfortably, and confidently in a multicultural, multi-religious world. Ultimately, the study of religion and religions is recommended as an antidote to fear of the unknown” (p. 30, Chidester, 2003). As Toropov, Brandon and Buckles, Luke (2002) said, “Perhaps the most important reason to study faiths beyond one’s own is that it’s a marvelous way to replace fear with experience and insight. It’s hard to be frightened of something you really understand” (p. 8).

Overall, the significance of study and examine religions can be depicted well by Hans Kung's words, cited by Jeniffer Pelupessy-Wowor (2016): “No peace among the nations without peace among religions; No peace among religions without dialogue among religions; No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions” (p. 103).

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