

## **Comparative perspectives on IRE in Europe**

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### **Comparing (I)RE: why and how?**

Comparative perspectives in education are important in order to better understand how supranational phenomena are dealt with. Seeing a broader picture is important in understanding developments in single countries. No country is isolated from developments elsewhere, therefore in today's globalized world systematic comparative efforts are increasingly important. However, one needs to pay attention to the particularities of each national context as well because educational systems are often very different (Bråten, 2013, 2015).

One example of a supranational phenomenon is the increasing number of Muslims in European countries, accompanied by publicly debated controversies. One example of a national phenomenon is the way IRE is dealt with in particular national contexts. Although in practice categorizing different 'types' of (I) RE is not that easy, in the introduction to this present book a distinction is made between: (1) IRE in state schools; (2) IRE in state-funded Islamic schools; (3) education about Islam as part of a non-confessional, integrative subject. Picking one country from each of these categories, I will make a brief comparison between Cyprus, the Netherlands and Denmark.

### ***Cyprus***

Having been under Ottoman rule from 1571, Cyprus has a long tradition of being divided into different communities based on religious affiliations. This was maintained during a period of British colonialism, till the 1960s. A war in 1974 divided the Island into a Turkish North and a Greek South. Religion is connected to sub-national identity on both sides: While the Turkish education system of the North is associated with Islam, the Greek education system of the South is connected to Orthodox Christianity. RI/RE for pupils belonging to religions other than Orthodox Christianity is not provided in the Greek part (notwithstanding a considerable Muslim population of 20%), but education for minorities can be arranged in the Turkish part. In state schools in the North, RE is organised as Islamic religious instruction (IRI) and there is no attention given to other religions or to Islamic denominations other than the Sunni tradition.

Present debates about issues concerning Islam as well as about the place and content of (I)RE/(I)RI in state schools are found on both sides of the island, but the idea of educating about religions seems to be largely unestablished. Overall, RE/RI is not seen as important by school principals and accordingly, the number of (I)RI lessons in schools is low and qualitative teacher training seems not to

be a priority. However, some new textbooks from 2016 from South Cyprus have added a small section about religions other than Orthodox Christianity.

### ***The Netherlands***

As in Cyprus, there is a system of segregation in the Netherlands, where society has been divided into three “pillars”, based on religion. This pillarized model is still present in education, where we can distinguish between state schools, Catholic schools and Protestant-Christian schools. While each school type accommodates ca. 30% of pupils, the remaining 10% are e.g. in Steiner, Montessori and Islamic schools – the latter being established in the 1980s, due to family reunion rights of guest workers arriving since 1960s. It may seem that a fourth pillar is appearing due to the increasing recognition of Islam as a major religion.

At present, efforts are made to accommodate the needs of all citizens in order to raise their religious literacy. Although the pillarized model is criticized, it is still intact, despite claims that the country is moving towards a post-pillarised age (Geurts, Avest & Bakker, 2014). In a pragmatic way, adaption to the new complexity happens in practice before the structure changes – hence the concepts ‘structural pillarization’ and ‘mental depillarization’. For instance, most “Christian schools” are open and inclusive to all, and governmental schools are moving from secular “neutrality” to “active pluralism”. The public debate has stimulated religious literacy, e.g. through the establishment of “Spiritual Movements” in 1985: a primary school subject for all with orientation about different religions and worldviews. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the killings of Pim Fortuyn and Theo von Gogh, Citizenship education was established in 2006, in order “to convey respect and knowledge of the basic values of a democratic constitutional state (...)”.

### ***Denmark***

In Denmark, there is a principle of equal treatment of religions and worldviews, but Lutheran Christianity has a highly privileged position. The importance of Christianity in national history, especially ‘*Grundtvigianism*’ is central to the Danish narrative. Since 75% of the Danish population are members of the Danish Church, this narrative has strong support in the public debate. A good illustration is the sensitivity regarding the name of the inclusive non-confessional state school subject, ‘*Knowledge of Christianity*’: when a school locally tried to change this title to the more inclusive term ‘*Religion*’, this was prohibited by the state. Another illustration is the reluctance to teach religions other than Christianity until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Furthermore, when students learn about Islam, this is always in comparison to Christianity (i.e. the Protestantism of the Danish Folk Church).

Some textbooks for state schools do include chapters on other religions from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, but studies have revealed a tendency to connect the topic of Islam with rules and conflict, thus reproducing stereotypes. A more positive picture is created when it comes to Christianity, in which case connections are made with love and absence of conflict (Kjeldsen, 2016). In the public debate in Denmark, the

cultural importance of Christianity has led to the explicit ‘othering’ of Islam, marking Islam as a threat to ‘Danishness’. This is dangerous as radicalization might be triggered more frequently if a radical distinction between “Danish values” and “Islamic values” is established and reproduced.

### **Considering ‘Islamic literacy’**

A Commonality across these cases is that Islam is the most rapidly growing minority religion, and that this is causing public concern about the potential growth of radicalization and extremism. The exception is North Cyprus, where there is a Muslim majority, but even here can we observe a concern with extremism (see e.g. the controversies about attempts to establish private Islamic schools which do not conform to the official Turkish teaching of Islam). Another similarity is that, despite religion and RE often being important in the public debate, RE is low on the school agenda in terms of practice: time allocation to lessons is low, and there is little emphasis on the training and professional development of teachers.

In contrast to the recommendations made in *Signposts* (Jackson 2014), the idea that there is a need to educate learners *about* Islam (or, for that matter, other minority religions), has not been well established. This might be expected in segregated models, where the main purpose is to educate students *into* their own religion. It is perhaps more surprising that the Danish inclusive model, which is pretending to be neutral and inclusive, is no less biased.

The establishment of numerous state-supported Islamic schools in the Netherlands is an example of how the accommodation of IRE is dependent on existing structures. It seems to be a pattern across national cases that Islam is dealt with in a way that reflects historical developments in the nation in question (Bråten 2014, p. 311). Being stuck in old structures is a major obstacle to addressing the present need for Islamic literacy – and by extension general religious literacy – in society. Neither Christianity nor Islam are effectively being taught as the complex evolving global religions they are.

A comparative perspective reveals that there is a too narrow focus on one’s own national context. It makes visible that a supranational perspective is important for a better understanding of the need for Islamic/religious literacy. We can also observe how concerns for national (religious) identity are a supranational phenomenon, an indication that the role and place of religion in national imaginaries are presently renegotiated in Europe (Bråten 2013, 115-118, 2014, 309). It could be recommended to combine concerns for national traditions with greater international awareness, including acknowledging Islam as a complex evolving global tradition, worthy of high-quality education. Thus, comparative perspectives are important for seeing a broader picture in national contexts.

### **References**

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