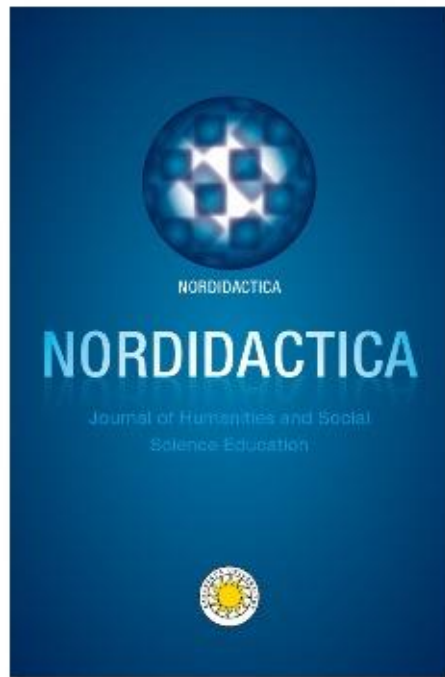


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## **Editorial:**

# **Research on Religious Education in Nordic countries: Introduction to Nordidactica 2015:2**

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*Abstract: This issue of the journal Nordidactica focuses on research in the field of religious education (RE). In Oddrun M. H. Bråten's article, a methodology for comparative studies is presented and a comparative analysis conducted, centering on the use of the concepts of 'learning about and from' in Religious Education in England and Norway. In Jonathan Doney's article we can read about the impact of the Ecumenical movement on the history of RE in England. Elisabet Haakedal discusses and compares two action research projects. Martin Ubani and a team of Finnish researchers present findings from research on RE teacher students. Gunnar J. Gunnarson and colleagues present findings from a study of Icelandic youths in a plural society, where they use theory of friendship and fear. Kathrine Kjærgaard provides us with insights into Greenlandic RE. In Mette Buchardt's article, we can read about the role of Cultural Protestantism in developments in RE in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Together these articles give a glimpse into the rich area of RE research today. In this introduction, I present the articles before offering some perspectives on the texts, promoting a more general discussion using my methodology as an analytical device.*

**KEYWORDS:** NORDIC RE RESEARCH, COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES, GREENLAND, DENMARK, NORWAY, ICELAND, FINLAND.

This special issue of *Nordidactica* has a focus on research on religious education (RE) in the Nordic countries. The Nordic countries are distinctive from each other, having their own particular history and practices regarding RE, but have perhaps also some common features. The idea of this publication originated with a symposium at the Nordic Conference of Religious Education (NCRE) in Reykjavik, Iceland, in June 2013. Mette Buchardt and I initiated this symposium because we wanted to bring together presentations which could contribute to a comparative perspective on RE in the Nordic countries. I had previously worked with a comparative study of England and Norway, and Mette Buchardt has been involved in historical research on the Nordic Welfare states, where her focus was on developments in RE in the Nordic countries. She even raises the question whether a Nordic Model for RE exists. We invited some colleagues from Norway, Greenland and England to a joint symposium, and for this publication, we were able to expand our scope and include research from Finland and Iceland as well. Warm thanks go to all who contributed. Read together these articles give a glimpse of the rich area of RE research in the Nordic countries today.

In the following, I will briefly describe each contribution, by presenting the authors, the title of the articles, the main research questions, their theoretical and methodological approaches, their data/ collection of data, and their central findings. Following this, I will offer some perspectives for further discussion of these articles, including comments on the articles' relevance in a supranational perspective.

**Oddrun M. H. Bråten's** (Sør-Trøndelag Univeristy College, Norway) article is called 'Should there be wonder and awe? A three-dimensional and four levels comparative methodology used to discuss the 'learning from' aspect of English and Norwegian RE.' The research questions are: What is comparative study of religious education? And: How does the idea of 'learning about and from' religion in Religious Education (RE) exist in both the English and Norwegian context. I present a suggested methodology for comparative studies in RE while also applying it in a comparative discussion of how the idea of a distinction between 'learning about and from religion' existing in both England and Norway.

This methodology is a synthesis of two sets of ideas. The first is that three dimensions should be considered in comparative education: supranational, national and sub-national processes. The second regards levels of curriculum, and include a societal, institutional, instructional and experiential level. An important background for this methodology is that I see comparative studies as studies of developments in specific countries/ nations in a supranational perspective. Mainly the material for discussion is taken from my book (Bråten 2013) and consists of studies of both law and curricular documents and interviews with teachers and pupils in schools in England and Norway. For this article, I also refer to some newer articles on the issue of 'learning about and from' as well as findings in a new empirical study on the Norwegian side.

I find that the ideas of 'learning about and from' are not well defined in either of the national contexts, but less so on the Norwegian side, where these concepts are only used explicitly in academic debate and are not in curricular documents. Thus, few

Norwegian teachers are familiar with these terms. There is however, ambivalence on both sides, especially looking at the way this is understood on the different levels of curricula, between academic debates, formal document texts, and teachers perceptions of the subjects aims. However, I find that teachers in both England and Norway say they believe RE is “inspiring to wonder and awe”, but it is perhaps unclear whether there should be “wonder and awe” if this represents a ‘learning from quality’, especially in the case of Norway.

**Jonathan Doney’s** (University of Exeter, England) article is ‘How did it become possible? Supranational Ecumenical developments and changes in Religious Education during the 1960s and 70s’. His title reflects his research question: what is the importance of the Ecumenical movement for the development of multifaith types of RE? Through historiographic methods combined with picking up and utilizing an idea from Foucault on investigating how certain practices became possible, he is looking at how ecumenical developments as supranational processes influenced English RE history. The data consists of historical documents, where he takes the important Schools Council Working Paper 36 as a point of departure. Central findings are that awareness of the supranational ecumenical discourses enriches the understanding of the development of World Religions Teaching thus renewing the understanding of the history of RE in England.

**Elisabet Haakedal’s** (University of Agder, Norway) article is: ‘Action research and development work in religion and worldview education – comparing communities of practice and cooperative networks.’ There are four research questions: (1) What are the main similarities and differences between the REDCo and the ROM projects regarding institutional basis, economic resources, leadership and administration? (2) What are the significant similarities and differences between the basic didactic approaches or models for RE as a common school subject in these two action research projects? (3) What are the similarities and differences between the two projects regarding research design and methods? To what degree do they apply the concept of community of practice in the same way? (4). If the REDCo and ROM projects on the one hand and the RE pilot on the other are comparable, what differences and similarities should be emphasized in order to reflect on further progress within practice oriented RE and RE teacher research? Methodologically the comparison is based on a combination of empathetic and critical hermeneutics. She discuss “Proximity of practices” in education research based on a comparative study of two related cases of action research, the REDCo project based at the University of Warwick (UW) with Robert Jackson as the director and the ROM project based at the University of Stavanger (UiS) with Geir Skeie as a leading initiator. A third, smaller case, in which the author has been involved, is referred to initially and in the final discussion in order to enrich the comparison.

Haakedal finds strong arguments for the value of proximity to practise in RE research, but also explores some of it’s challenges. The thorough analysis of the existing studies brings out what experiences can be extracted for futher use, such as the emphasis put on sensibility and building trust, and ”the sharing of oral space”, and which factors must be regarded as specific to those particular projects, such as

personal skills and resources, institutional base and national and local contexts. She also points out the need to challenge and/or maintain an appropriate balance between critical research and system supporting implementation studies.

In **Martin Ubani** (University of Eastern Finland), **Arto Kallioniemi**, and **Saila Poulter's** (University of Helsinki) article '*Finnish Class Student Teachers' Perceptions of Religious Education*' the research questions are: (1) What are the issues that make RE an important, positive or negative subject? (2) How the students perceive RE? and (3) How do students differ in their attitudes towards RE? They present empirical data regarding the student RE teachers reporting from a survey that included qualitative open-ended questions and a quantitative section. This study is part of a sequence of studies repeated in 1987, 1984, 2000 and 2014. The data collected was from students in eight teacher education institutions.

According to the study, most of the students view RE as an important subject. Those students who themselves had a religious worldview saw it as more important than did those with secular views of life. Students emphasize elements such as education in ethics and values, acquirement of cultural skills and the pupils' growth, as factors that make the subject important. The student teachers view the subject mostly in positive or more neutral terms, rather than negative. Pedagogical practice was considered both the solution and problem when students were evaluating aspects of RE. Further, the location of the educational institution in small towns or larger towns turned out to be important for how students viewed RE, which indicates a need for recognition of locality aspects in teacher education. The article gives insight into the Finnish context of non-confessional but denominational parallel subject model of RE. In conclusion they point out that, "there is still a great deal of uncertainty among teachers about how to teach RE according to one's own religion while at the same time as a non-confessional subject."

**Gunnar J. Gunnarsson**, **Gunnar E. Finnbogason**, **Hanna Ragnarsdóttir** and **Halla Jónsdóttir's** (University of Iceland) article is called 'Friendship, diversity and fear: young people's life views and life values in a multicultural society'. The research question was 'How do young people in Iceland experience friendship, diversity and fear in a multicultural society?'. In the project, they used interdisciplinary approaches of religious education, multicultural studies and pedagogy. Findings from an empirical study on young people (18 years and older) in Iceland are presented. Some of the background is that only fifteen years ago 90% the population belonged to the National Lutheran Church of Iceland, while now the number is down to 75%. Theories about the significance of friendship and fear are used; for instance, they claim "fear exists at all times but what causes the fear changes in time". The findings indicate that the participants generally have positive attitudes towards diversity and that a majority of participants have strong opinions against racism and bullying. Friends are one of the things that provide security. Their results are relevant, not only for RE, but also for subjects like Social Studies, Life Skills Education and Intercultural education, thus pointing to RE's interconnectedness with other educational areas.

**Kathrine Kjærgaard's** (University of Greenland/ Nuuk) article is called '*Religious Education, Identity and Nation Building – the case of Greenland*'. The question she

investigates is how changes in religious education reflect other historical process. Methodologically she draws on some parts of Bråtens methodology, referring to levels of curriculum as well as ideas of national imaginaries, but also on Bernstein's idea of re-contextualization. Being part of an ongoing historical and comparative study of religious education in Greenland, this article gives an historical outline as a background for focusing on some current trends. Especially she discusses a reform from 2002 where religious education was given non-denominational status while at the same time it was aiming to strengthen decolonization from Denmark. Christianity still occupies a primary role in the curriculum, but a new category in the RE curriculum was 'Inuit religion'. The article discusses some of the political and educational elements inherent in the new curriculum and examines the interplay between religious education, identity and nation building in Greenland.

**Mette Buchardt's** (Aalborg University) article 'Cultural Protestantism and Nordic Religious Education: An incision in the historical layers behind the Nordic welfare state model' is part of a larger project exploring the histories of the Nordic welfare states. Here research interests concern how cultural Protestantism and liberal theology, originating from German universities, was a source of inspiration among university theologians in the Nordic countries especially from the 1890s-1930s. The article focuses on three transnationally acting theologians, early historians and psychologists of religion who involved themselves in the question of education, namely Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931), Edvard Lehmann (1862-1930) and Eivind Berggrav (1884-1959). These interconnected theologians became important for how RE developed in Sweden (Söderblom), Denmark (Lehmann) and Norway (Berggrav). In her article, Buchardt asks whether there is a Nordic Model for relationship between religion and state, and investigates the role of the educational system in establishing and maintaining this. She digs into history, tracing the idea of putting religion to work for the Nordic welfare states.

***In the following, I will offer some reflections towards a debate on the articles collected in this volume, through the goggles of my own analytical device, the suggested methodology for comparative analysis. This provides a framework for capturing different levels of national processes in relation to supranational processes. I will have a special focus on the relevance of this research across national borders, i.e. in a comparative perspective.***

*Doney's* article covers societal, professional and political debates and developments, but points to consequences for, for instance, formal curricular changes, i.e. the inclusion of world religions in RE teaching. He explores the significance of supranational processes influences on national developments through his focus on the process from the ecumenical movement within a certain period of history. Through this, the importance of supranational processes for understanding developments in different countries is highlighted. He has a side view to what this implies for other

national contexts, and a question of relevance of the Ecumenical movement for developments in RE in other countries could be explored further.

*Haakedal* explores the connections between research and teachers and teaching, while inquiring into “disturbances” from the normative documents and political decisions when she raises the issue of balance between implementation of such documents and critical research. Many religious education scholars across the Nordic countries are interested in research with proximity to practise. Haakedal’s articles have relevance beyond borders, especially since she is considering projects in two different national contexts. As she compares a Norwegian and English project in her article, a supranational dimension is present when she considers the significance of the different national contexts in which the action research projects she compares are situated. The relevance of more regional, locally based factors comes into play in her eventual comparison with her own project, the RE pilot and its different conditions compared to the other Norwegian project. Thus, a subnational dimension is also present in her analysis.

*Ubani and the Finnish team* explore the role of the teacher, or teacher education, an area which is probably understudied. They also point to some problematic sides of implementing the Finnish formal curricula. The issue of whether teacher educations should be more aware of local variation draws attention to the relationship between a national and sub-national dimension. Their article mainly explores national processes in Finland, but at the same time, the question of our ability to educate RE teachers well enough for today’s challenges has great significance beyond the Finnish context. Our attention is drawn to the role of the RE teacher and to the qualities of teacher education.

*Gunnarssons’ Icelandic team’s* main emphasis is on the students, as they explore student identities in a pluralized society. Potentially this may challenge existing approaches to teaching and inspire curriculum developments. They investigate Icelandic youth’s relationship to pluralization, against a backdrop of sinking church attendance (secularization), and pluralization and secularization are both supranational processes. In their discussion, they even refer to the fact that, travel and use of Internet (i.e. globalization), is also forming the attitudes of Icelandic youth. This is of course true beyond the Icelandic context, a supranational development related to globalization. This study is relevant across borders because it explores these supranational processes in an Icelandic context, but also because of the interesting theoretical approach of theories of friendship.

*Kjærgaard’s* article has much focus on societal developments, but she uses the idea of levels of curricula to analyze the relationship between society, curricular texts, teachers and students. For instance, she questions whether some teachers and students could possibly make sense of this new approach to RE from 2002, when this consists of an approach which may be alien to them because it is radically new, compared to what has been the traditional practice. The article thus sheds light upon the possible tensions and incoherencies between the levels of curricula.

I see it as a special enrichment to this issue that Greenland is included. It gives opportunity to reflect not only on the history of Greenland, but also on aspects of RE

in the other Nordic countries. I see a possibility for reexamining other Scandinavian cases in view of the Greenlandic history, particularly perhaps the case of Norway as our history of nation building also had an element of decolonization from Denmark. At the same time Norway has a parallel history viz-aviz our Sami minority, as Denmark has to Greenlandic Inuit's, as do Sweden and Finland as well. Even if here are surely some significant differences, we do not really know what they are. This Greenlandic version of the "Scandinavian blend" of culture, religion, identity and policy in a way mirrors the other Scandinavian countries. It could perhaps even shed some additional light on the "Nordic model" which Buchardt discuss in her article.

The special history in the case of Greenland, of isolation from supranational influences, in my view contributes most significantly to illuminating the point of their relevance. This is firstly the history of what happened when no such influences existed, and then the history of what happened when the Danish authorities opened up for supranational influences, for instance regarding developments in liberal Lutheran theology. Kjærgaard writes, "It is probably difficult to find a place where the impact of Christianity have been more massive and uncontested than in the small and isolated (...) Greenlandic society" (...). When religious freedom came, in 1953, other denominations and religions emerged there immediately and "the results of the historical-critical theological research that had been going on in Europe since the 18th century were finally brought to Greenland by new textbooks". Until then, for instance the history of creation in the Bible was seen as the full and only history of the creation of the world.

**Buchardt** makes explicit comparison between developments in RE in Nordic countries. It is about the background for transforming the formal legislations and curricula of RE in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Taking the question of possible tensions between levels, I wonder how teachers in Sweden, Denmark and Norway reacted to the new style of religious education following from the influences of Söderblom, Luhmann and Berggrav. She does not touch upon the questions of how the new developments were perceived by teachers and pupils, but rather studies unknown details of the societal and institutional levels, of the formation of the idea of religion as cultural heritage as a useful tool in the forming of the welfare states. We know that this changed RE in ways, which has been significant ever since.

Ideas and developments within liberal protestant theology is a supranational process. Buchardt identifies its origin in the German context and traces its specific histories of influence in a formative phase of a new type of RE in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. This illustrates how supranational influences are formed differently, reflecting the specific national contexts. In my view, this idea of religion as culture is central to any account of national imaginaries (Bråten 2013, p. 42) in these countries. An important insight from this is that references to Christianity as 'cultural heritage', which seems so self-evidently "true" today, has this specific history of coming into being. We probably need to understand this history of religion that was deliberately 'turned into culture' in any comparison to other countries. I will argue that it contributes to explaining how this kind of 'secularized' and inclusive, but still in a way Lutheran, RE is possible here, but also why this would perhaps not be suitable



everywhere. A question for a wider comparative perspective is also, what happened in Germany, and in other places? Is this a piece in a puzzle towards explaining different approaches to RE in traditionally Protestant vs. traditionally Catholic contexts?

An interesting question is also, what the relationship is between Buchardt's and Doney's findings regarding the influence from the ecumenical movement. Doney launches the possibility that this paved the way for teaching of world religions to become possible, while Buchardt explains the roots of the cultural heritage argument. Do we have here a spur for explaining a tension between two different types of aims featuring in many RE models today? I believe this is described well by Skeie (2006, 24) when he says that Norwegian RE is "running on two tracks": That there is an ambivalence of wanting to address the new plurality on the one hand, and on the other of wanting to maintain and update old links to the national tradition (or national imaginaries).

Still being unsure whether there is room for "wonder and awe" in RE today, this makes me wonder; maybe we should not pretend that RE is "just an ordinary school subject", and rather regard it as a special subject, especially important, perhaps? It seems that in religious education questions of content and development are more sensitive than usual to debates on the societal level, be it nationally, supranationally or sub-nationally. The cultural Protestants wanted to put liberal RE to work for the nation states; what if we ask what kind of "work" RE is supposed to do today? Perhaps then, the purposes and different kinds of aim for RE that we have presently could become clearer.

I have taken the liberty of sharing some of my own thoughts and reflections from reading these articles. I am sure they will provide readers with many opportunities to reflect upon these and further issues and on the importance in RE research in the Nordic countries today.

**Oddrun M. H. Bråten, Phd.**

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