

Martin Rothgangel / Martin Jäggle / Thomas Schlag (eds.)

Religious Education at Schools in Europe

Part 1: Central Europe

Vienna University Press



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In cooperation with Philipp Klutz and Mónica Solymár

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Preface: Religious Education at Schools in Europe

At a time when educational issues are increasingly determining social and political discourse and major reforms of the education system are being discussed and implemented, and a time when migration has become a significant phenomenon, contributing to changes in the religious landscape of the European continent, it is highly appropriate to focus our attention on the concrete situation regarding religious education (RE) in Europe. Of course, the subject area is conceived and organised in different ways across the continent, including the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. With few exceptions, religious education has been established as a specific subject in publicly funded schools, while, in a few cases, studies of religion are included as a dimension of other parts of the curriculum. At the same time, it is a subject area that is undergoing considerable change. (In this series, authors use the term ‘religious education’ in a variety of ways, partly according to the history of their own education systems). Beyond the all-important tasks of taking stock and making international comparisons, the aim in this series of books is to create a foundation for further action in the field of education, especially with regard to interfaith expertise.

In stark contrast to a move in the direction of religion being a ‘private matter’ and towards ‘religion-free schools’, supranational organisations are, for the first time in Europe, addressing issues relating to religion and education. While 9/11 may be seen as the triggering event here, there are wider reasons for such a development. When the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) deals with the issue of religion and belief in education within the scope of its programme ‘Tolerance and Non-Discrimination’, the topic has obviously become an important one for the future of Europe and for security and cooperation on the continent. In their Toledo Guiding Principles (OSCE 2007), the OSCE sees teaching about religions and beliefs as part of a high-quality education system that expands pupils’ horizons, makes the complexity of religions and world views comprehensible for pupils in an interdisciplinary way, and provides them with suitable information and skills to develop an impartial

approach, as well as encouraging freedom of religion and belief, as reflected in the human rights codes.

The Council of Europe in turn, in several of its documents, has focused on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, paying particular attention to the issue of dealing with religious diversity in schools. It values religious diversity highly and demands that it be given appropriate space, rejecting any restriction of religion to people's private lives as well as rejecting the notion of 'religion-free schools'. The Council of Europe publication *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: a Reference Book for Schools* (Council of Europe 2007) provides a checklist that makes clear the extent to which the whole school is required to play a part, while the 2008 Recommendation from the Committee of Ministers, the Foreign Ministers of the 47 member states, is a major step in encouraging policy makers, schools and teacher trainers to prioritise the development of inclusive forms of education about religions and beliefs in their countries (Council of Europe 2008). A guidance on implementing the Recommendation for policy makers, schools and teacher trainers in the member states was published in 2014 (Jackson 2014a; discussed in Jackson 2014b).

The phenomenon of migration is triggering contentious discussions on suitable responses to the challenges it sometimes creates. Irrespective of the topicality of this issue, it is becoming increasingly clear that education and religion can play an important role in clarifying issues such as identity and belonging, ethnicity and culture. Such clarifications are important both for the future of migrants as well as for the attitude of the population of a country towards migration. Since religion is, for many people, a crucial element in how they interpret themselves and the world around them, its recognition and appropriate representation is critical for the recognition of the individual.

The complex issue of religious education in public schools also concerns the school in its entirety as well as many of its subjects of instruction and projects. We will focus our attention on the organisational form of religious education, i. e. the subject of religion or its alternatives, in which the issue of religion(s) is an integral part. We acknowledge here that we are not dealing with the topic exhaustively, even though we are making an important contribution towards an understanding of the issues involved.

The project 'Religious Education at Schools in Europe' (REL-EDU), which is divided up into six volumes (Central Europe, Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe) (cf. www.rel-edu.eu), aims to research the situation with regard to religious education in Europe. The chapters in each regional volume outline, first of all, the organisational form of religious education in the particular countries covered. This is done on the basis of thirteen key issues, which were clarified with the authors from the various countries at two symposia held at the University of Vienna in 2011 and 2012, in

order to achieve as much coherence as possible for the publications. The formulation of key issues allows specific points of comparison between different countries in Europe, thereby facilitating a comparative approach and further research into specific aspects of the comparison.

The publication by Rothgangel and Schröder (2009) served as a kind of predecessor project, one which was also conducted based on key issues. In addition, earlier internationally oriented predecessor projects should be referred to. Since a comprehensive discussion of the corresponding literature is being undertaken in the methodological contribution by Friedrich Schweitzer in this volume, at this point four published projects will be mentioned as examples. The following five-volume work from the mid-1970s was a pioneering publication on the subject of religious education:

- Schultze, H., and H. Kirchhoff, eds. 1975–1977. *‘Christian Education in Europe’* (German title: *Christliche Erziehung in Europa*), Stuttgart/München: Calwer/Kösel (5 volumes: England, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, Poland).

The fact that research into the area of religious education has become more international in recent years and that comparative research on the topic is un-circumventable is shown by the following three publications:

- Jackson, R., S. Miedema, W. Weiße, and J.-P. Willaime, eds. 2007. *Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Kuyk, E., R. Jensen, D. Lankshear, E. Löh Manna, and P. Schreiner, eds. 2007. *Religious Education in Europe. Situation and current trends in schools*. Oslo: IKO.
- Lähnemann, J., and P. Schreiner, eds. 2009. *Interreligious and Values Education in Europe. Map and Handbook*. Münster: Comenius.

Below, the thirteen key issues mentioned above are introduced briefly¹. The first three key issues examine the frameworks of society, law and politics. Here, historical explanations should be very useful in helping us understand the status quo.

¹ In the German edition of this volume (Jäggle, M., M. Rothgangel, and T. Schlag, eds. 2013. *Religiöse Bildung an Schulen in Europa. Teil 1: Mitteleuropa*, Göttingen: V&R unipress) there were used only twelve key issues. The key issue ‘11. Empirical Research concerning religious education’ is added, also the chapters Croatia and Liechtenstein. All Chapters are updated.

1. The socio-religious background of the country

This brief insight into the socio-religious situation deals, in particular, with important changes, such as those that follow in the wake of migration.

2. Legal framework for religious education and the relationship between religious communities and the state

The relationship between churches, religious groups and the state is regulated differently in each country, with consequences for the different legal frameworks that exist for religious education.

3. Developments in the country's education policy

Across Europe, efforts at reform to the education system are being made, which also have direct and indirect effects on religious education.

After outlining these framework conditions, in addition to the issues four to six key aspects of religious education come to the fore:

4. Role of religiously sponsored schools, including any changes and developments, legal relationships

The place of religiously sponsored schools in the education landscape of each country reveals much about state and societal recognition of the importance of churches and religious groups in the education system, as well as about the commitment to education of the churches and religious groups.

5. Conceptions and tasks of religious education

The conceptions and tasks of religious education expresses how it is typically positioned between the religious communities, the school and young people – as well as society as a whole. It is in the interrelationship between these different players that the challenge of religious education lies.

6. Practice / reality of religious education in different schools

Depending on the type of school in question, religious education can present different frameworks, challenges and difficulties.

In issues seven to ten, important contextual phenomena in religious education at the level of the school are addressed, and a targeted concentration on ecumenical and interfaith cooperation and the education of religion teachers undertaken.

7. Observations on alternative subjects / learning areas like ethics, philosophy etc.

Consideration of subjects / learning areas offered 'parallel' to religious education is important, as their availability or non-availability as well as their relationship to religious education (e.g. as an alternative subject or as an elective subject) has not only an indirect effect on the way in which religious education is provided, it also affects what kind of ethical and religious education those pupils who do not attend religion class receive.

8. Dealing with religious diversity

The question of how to deal with diversity and which forms of cooperation the different religious players within society can come up with has become a critical challenge in European countries.

9. Religion in school outside of religious education

Does religion have a role to play in school beyond that of a specific subject offered to pupils? The answer to this question reveals to what extent the whole climate of the school is religion-friendly.

10. Training of teachers of religious education: institutes, structures, priorities issues

This point addresses an important structural determinant which, based on the empirically proven importance of the character of the religion teacher for the religious education of pupils, deserves special attention.

Since the aim here is not merely to take stock of the situation but instead to make suggestions for the next steps required in the area of religious education, it was important to formulate concrete desiderata as well as challenges for each country and direct the reader towards further sources of information.

11. Empirical Research concerning religious education

For a long time empirical research concerning religious education was neglected. In the last ten years, however, there have been more and more empirical studies. Of special interest are the relevant studies in the respective country and the different areas addressed in empirical research.

12. Desiderata / challenges for religious education in a European context

Here, the results for each country from the analysis of the key issues mentioned above are examined with a view to finding out which topics or issues would be important for further work in the area of religious education in Europe.

13. Further information (e.g., relevant literature on religious education, institutions, websites)

The selection of additional sources of information should facilitate further research in the field of religious education in the respective countries.

Based on these key issues, the articles listed here lead to interesting results, the comparative analysis of which is reserved for a later publication.

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Vienna, 14/4/2015

Martin Rothgangel / Martin Jäggle / Thomas Schlag

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Comparing Religious Education in Schools in European Countries: Challenges for International Comparative Research

The aim of the present volume – and of the volumes to follow in this series – is to present the different ways in which religious education is organized and taught in schools in European countries. The first task in this context is to provide information about the current situation and its different social, cultural, legal, and educational backgrounds. Yet it is easy to see that this endeavour inevitably implies a comparative perspective. How do the different countries compare in respect to religious education at school? Are there common characteristics shared by at least a number of countries or must the model used in a particular country be viewed exclusively as an individual case that can only be appreciated and evaluated in its own national context? From a different point of view one may also wonder if the major differences to be observed can really be attributed to the national contexts or if there are similarities, for example, between teachers in different countries that are much stronger than the differences related to their respective nationalities. In other words, liberal teachers in Austria, for example, could be much closer to their liberal colleagues in the United Kingdom than to their conservative colleagues in their home country. Catholic religion teachers in Germany could have more in common with Catholic teachers in the Netherlands than with their Protestant colleagues in Germany, etc.

Such questions indicate that the presentation of the different ways in which religious education is organized and taught in schools in European countries, leads on to questions and problems that usually are discussed in comparative education. This is why this chapter addresses questions of comparative research in religious education which can be considered an emerging field of study.

Comparative research has special presuppositions. It takes up specific interests and, most often at least today, also requires international cooperation. Clear beginnings of comparative approaches in religious education can be found at least 100 years ago. In his considerations on the future of religious education in the United States, George Albert Coe, for example, refers to the experiences in different European countries as his case studies (Coe 1913). In 1930, Otto Eberhard went even further and published a volume ‘Welterziehungsbewegung’

(Eberhard 1930) – a title that, in today's language would probably read 'A Global Educational Movement'. The book, which covers new developments in education around the world, was written from a Christian ecumenical perspective as well as in the spirit of the educational reform movements of the time.

Since the 1970s, international cooperation and dialogical exchange in religious education in Europe and beyond became much more established and widespread than was the case at earlier times. While certain international initiatives at an institutional level, for example, in relationship to the international Sunday School movement, the ecumenical movement, or educational reform movements go back as far as the time of the late nineteenth century, regular seminars and established groups like the 'International Seminar on Religious Education and Values' (ISREV), the 'International Academy of Practical Theology' (IAPT) or the 'International Society for Empirical Research in Theology' (ISERT), to only mention the most important ones, did not come into existence before the last 40 years. There were, however, important precursors on a more practical level (cf. Schreiner and Holt 1995). Such groups or associations now serve as an informal yet increasingly stable institutional basis for international exchange which obviously is valued by a growing number of researchers in the field of religious education cherishing international contacts and cooperation.

Such associations and conferences tend to be not denominationally oriented and bring together people with different denominational and religious affiliations. At the same time, the traditional denominational borderlines in Europe can still be felt. For example, there are Catholic forms of cooperation, especially in Southern Europe which should also be mentioned here.¹

Regular German-Italian, German-French and since recently again German-Polish meetings of Catholic religious educators belong to this category. The results of such meetings have become available in print as well. The seminar 'Comparative Religious Education in Europe' took place from 1997 to 2006 every year at VIU (Venice International University). The participants, of Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox affiliation, came from six European countries. The question of the religious and cultural development in Europe was the core interest for the work of these meetings (cf. as a collection of essays: Bock et al. 2007). Since 2002, there has been a German/Polish journal with articles in German and in Polish (always in both languages: *Keryks. Międzynarodowy Przegląd Katechetyczno-Pedagogicznoreligijny/Internationale Religionspädagogisch-katechetische Rundschau*).

Given the growing and continued interest in international exchange, it is surprising that not more systematic work was actually done on topics of international comparative religious education in the past, although interest in this

¹ I am grateful to the editors of the present volume for pointing these out to me.

field of research is now growing rapidly. In the years since the turn of the new century, international comparative studies have come to play an important role in religious education research.

My own perspective is based on comparative work that I have been involved in, concerning religious education in the United States and in Germany (Osmer and Schweitzer 2003), concerning Protestant and Roman Catholic forms of religious education in Germany in past and present (Schweitzer et al. 2002; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Schweitzer and Simojoki 2005; Schweitzer et al. 2010) as well as concerning non-formal types of religious education (confirmation work) in different European countries (Schweitzer, Ilg and Simojoki 2010). The attempt of internationalising the fields of religious education and practical theology has been very important to me (cf. Fowler, Nipkow and Schweitzer 1991; Schweitzer and van der Ven 1999; Osmer and Schweitzer 2003).² It must also be mentioned, however, that my background is German and that readers should be aware of the limitations of any national perspective, including my own.

1. What Is Comparative Research in Religious Education? – Initial Considerations

Within the present volume, models of religious education used in different countries will be the first object for comparison. This includes not only comparisons between different countries but also between different denominational types of Christian religious education (Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic) and of Jewish or Muslim religious education as well as of non-denominational types (multifaith, religious studies, etc.) and a so-called alternative subject 'ethics' that may also address topics related to religion. So comparisons can take different directions – international, interdenominational, interreligious.

Comparative studies are used in a variety of fields, including education, religious studies, history, economy, sociology, law, etc. (for a helpful general overview cf. Kaelble and Schriewer 2003; for comparative education see Bray, Adamson and Mason 2007; Cowen and Kazamias 2009; for the German discussion see Allemann-Ghionda 2004; Waterkamp 2006; Adick 2008). Such studies are not based on a single methodology but increasingly make use of all methodologies current in the respective fields – analytical, empirical, historical,

2 This chapter builds upon earlier publications on international comparative research in religious education (cf. Schweitzer 1998 and 2004). In the following, I am using parts of these earlier publications without referencing it in detail. Some of the ideas in this chapter were presented at international conferences in Lund/Sweden, Dribergen/The Netherlands, Ottawa/Canada, and Rome.

etc. This indicates that comparative research in religious education should also not be seen as limited to one particular methodology but must be conceived of as an umbrella term for many different approaches. Moreover, comparative work tends to be interdisciplinary and often even multidisciplinary.

Generally speaking, comparative approaches make use of comparisons between either different phenomena or between the same phenomenon in different contexts. An example for comparing different phenomena in the field of religion is the comparison of Christianity and Hinduism. Studies across different contexts, such as Hinduism in India and in the UK, would be an example of studying the same religion in different contexts.

This example also shows that the phenomena to be compared must have something in common – Christianity and Hinduism are, or at least are considered, religions (an assumption which is less automatic than one might assume at first glance – the notion of religion as an entity has itself come under discussion, and it is an open question if and to what degree religion can be separated from culture, etc.). Without something in common, however, comparison would not make much sense – just like common lore has it: apples are no oranges. For purposes of comparison, there must always be a common point of reference ('*tertium comparationis*'). This is also obvious in the case of comparing the same phenomenon in different contexts, like different ways of integrating the younger generation through schooling in different societies. In this case, we can learn more about the possible functions of schooling but also about different ways of working with young people which may lead to innovations in the countries compared or in other countries that may try to learn from their example.

Comparative research in religious education obviously can focus on how the same phenomenon – religious education or an aspect of it, like different ways of teaching, textbooks, styles of group work, etc. – appears in different denominational, religious, and/or regional or national contexts. Looking at religious education from this perspective can broaden our horizons in that it makes us think about questions which do not occur in our own context.

At this point, this initial understanding of religious education may suffice. The understanding will become more detailed in the following, especially concerning different methodologies.

2. Reasons and Expectations

It is important to be clear about the different possible reasons for doing international comparative research in religious education. These reasons are closely related to the expectations which, in turn, will influence and shape this kind of research, including its methodology.

The starting point for any interest in comparative religious education most naturally is the assumption that this approach has something to add to this field, just like with comparative research in other fields. So what does comparative research in religious education have to add to this field?

In my understanding, we can distinguish between general reasons for comparative research in religious education and more specific reasons related to our contemporary situation, among others, in Europe.

Among the general reasons I count motives such as Christian ecumenism, interreligious education and dialogue, internationalization, globalization, etc. Among the specific reasons, the effects of European unification are a good example. This process of unification is related to internationalization and globalization. At the same time, it is more limited and more defined. It is creating a new political and economic situation that also affects education. While the binding agreements on which the Union is founded leave matters pertaining to education to the individual member states, it has become obvious that the unification does in fact also affect education. Comparative assessment studies like PISA on student achievement are a well-known example of such international effects, political and legal adaptations based on non-formalized political cooperation within Europe are another case in point. If research in religious education should play a role in such processes, it can no longer be limited to just one country. Especially since September 11, 2001, European political institutions have increasingly become interested in matters of intercultural and interreligious education (cf. Council of Europe 2005) which also indicates a growing need for international research.

International associations or seminars in religious education indicate the potential of international exchange and dialogue. It is probably not unfair to say that, at least compared to other fields of education especially in German speaking countries, religious education has in fact become much more international or internationally minded, given the various international networks in this field and the considerable number of international conferences now taking place on a fairly regular basis.

This situation implies a certain achievement but there also are a number of severe limitations. Strong national boundaries still prevent research in religious education from becoming truly international. If an analyst would compare research in religious education with research in medical science, for example, one major difference would probably be very obvious. Medical discoveries or inventions in one European country will often have an immediate effect on the medical praxis in any other country, at least within Europe where comparable medical systems are in existence. This is clearly not the case with discoveries or inventions in the field of religious education. German or Austrian religious educators may be interested in religious education in the Netherlands or in

Belgium but what research is done there, only has minimal effects on what people will accept as good practice in Germany or Austria.

There are interesting implications to this observation. One traditional argument for the need for a national focus of research in education points to the political context in which educational praxis is embedded. Education is always strongly influenced by national factors such as political decisions on the curriculum, etc. It is also influenced by regional or even local traditions and challenges such as the actual composition of the respective population. Moreover, it must be in line with the training of teachers available in the respective country because without the appropriate personnel especially schools cannot be sustained, etc. Yet while all these factors continue to play their role in the present, it can also not be overlooked that international parameters are of increasing influence as well. I have mentioned international student assessment as one example. Other aspects refer to the effects of globalization and to certain educational movements or ideas that are of international influence (cf. Schweitzer 2001) – i.e., transnational influences that are also much discussed in comparative education.

It is also interesting to note what kind of research has really gained international attention in the field of religious education in the past. If there has ever been a *lingua franca* in religious education – an international language and a means of international communication –, it has certainly been the psychology of education or the psychology of religion. Throughout the twentieth century, psychological research has been operative in this way – from William James and Edwin Diller Starbuck, from Freud and Jung in Austria and Switzerland in the first half of the century, all the way to Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson and Fowler in later times (cf. Fowler, Nipkow and Schweitzer 1991). Many of their theories have been challenged, among others, because they are not sensitive enough to different contexts. Yet they continue to stand for the possibility of international research in the field of religious education. This observation underscores the open question how far we can extend international research in religious education to more practical issues—models of teaching and learning, the curriculum as a theory of what contents are indispensable, organizational models, etc. International comparative research in religious education is one attempt of extending existing boundaries within research and of making them more permeable.

Comparative research in religious education is still at an early point of its development. Yet a first attempt of summarizing some of the main reasons and expectations for it may be of help for future work. The aspects described in the following are not meant to be exhaustive. They have grown out of my own experience with this kind of work, often together with colleagues from other

countries, other denominations, and sometimes other religions, and also often in the context of international seminars or research projects.

2.1 The need for integrated international research in religious education is clearly growing

As can be seen from the increasing number of international conferences, the idea of creating a steady type of exchange between representatives of religious education from different countries has become quite popular. At a time of internationalization and globalization, international exchange seems timely and natural. Yet from my point of view, this kind of exchange only makes sense in the long run if the intended process of learning from each other can be based on systematic (comparative) research. In this understanding, comparative research is the attempt of carrying on the work of international consultations on a different level and with a different time structure which should allow for more detailed exchanges and more thorough theoretical analysis. Such research is the more or less natural outcome of earlier informal encounters and exchanges, and it should be pursued in order to increase the yield of international cooperation. Moreover, for religious education as an academic discipline, international research has become increasingly important for producing the credentials for a field of study which, according to today's understanding of the academic world, has to compete with other disciplines which have turned international as well.

2.2 Research in religious education must include international comparisons in order to evaluate national models and to capture international developments

Many research questions cannot be adequately addressed as long as we limit ourselves to only one denominational, religious, or national context. In many cases, a particular country has opted for a certain model, for example, of religious education within the state school. Consequently it is difficult to really find out about the outcome and consequences of different models. Germany, for example, has based religious education, for the most part, on some kind of cooperation between state and church while Sweden, for example, has opted for a stronger separation between state and church and consequently for a religious studies approach in religious education. In France, there is no religious education in state schools. It is very hard if not impossible to do research about alternative options within one of these countries because such options do not really exist there or, at best, only to a very limited degree. Yet international

comparative research on the effects of the different types of religious education in Germany and Sweden and of the non-availability of religious education in French state schools could be highly interesting.

Another aspect of the need for international comparative research has to do with the increasingly international or even global nature of the phenomena under study. Models of schooling and aims of education have long ceased to only be at the discretion of national politicians even if the politicians often try to make their national audiences forget about the many invisible hands that are operative internationally. Moreover, cultural developments like pluralization and individualization clearly are not limited to just one country, and the forces that fuel them, most likely also thrive on factors like international media, international marketing, etc.

While most of my examples in this chapter, in line with the scope of the present volume, come from the context of the school and of religious education at school, there is no reason why comparative research should not apply to other fields. In the case of religious education, the relationship between formal, informal and non-formal forms is of special importance. It has been established by a number of empirical studies that religious education or nurture in the family is of great influence on how students perceive religious education at school (cf. Bucher 2000). Most of my arguments apply no less to religious education in school than to educational settings in the congregation, nurture or education in the family, youth work, adult education, etc. The most recent example along these lines is the international study of confirmation work in different European countries (see below).

2.3 International comparative research in religious education can challenge assumptions otherwise taken for granted

Explanations for certain developments in religious education are often based on assumptions which can be tested in new ways by applying them to similar or parallel developments in a different context. According to my experience (cf. Osmer and Schweitzer 2003; Schweitzer and Simojoki 2005), it seems that such assumptions and explanations developed in one particular context, often will not stand this test. This makes comparative research even more attractive. Comparative research can lead to new and challenging questions and insights which probably could not have been reached otherwise. One example for this concerns the relationship between theology, religious education, and democracy. The standard German textbook view claims that liberal theology, child-oriented education, and antidemocratic attitudes went hand in hand at the beginning of the twentieth century and that the approaches to religious education

developed at that time must be considered politically suspect. This argument was often used by later Barthian religious educators in order to convince people of their not so liberal theology. If we compare the developments of religious education in Germany and in the United States, we come to realize that liberal theology and child-oriented education can also be closely related to democracy (for example, with J. Dewey or G.A. Coe, cf. Osmer and Schweitzer 2003). In other words, in light of international comparison, the standard text book account is in much need of correction!

2.4 Intercultural, ecumenical, and interreligious dialogue must include the ways in which different cultures, denominations, and religions practise religious education

Intercultural, ecumenical, and interreligious dialogue and cooperation which is becoming more and more important for religious education, should not only focus on doctrines, rituals, forms of ethics, etc. It should also include some in-depth understanding of how religious education is seen in different national, denominational, and religious traditions. Otherwise the dialogue will be lacking in an important respect—which, in this case and in the context of religious education, clearly would be a contradiction in terms. How can we be interested in other religions as a topic for religious education while omitting all considerations concerning education in such traditions? Without addressing religious education, the dialogue will not include the ways in which a denomination or religion deals with new generations and in which new generations respond to the demands of the older generation.

So far, the various forms of intercultural, ecumenical, and interreligious dialogue have, for the most part, tended to neglect such questions. While the literature on different religions and on comparative theology is clearly growing, the same is not true for education and religious education as viewed from the perspective of different religions (as exceptions see Tulasiewicz and Brock 1988; Tulasiewicz and To 1993). Comparative research in religious education could play an important role in filling this gap, thus contributing to the dialogue between different denominations, religions, and cultures, and at the same time creating new possibilities for religious education itself.

2.5 Political reasons make it desirable to develop shared international standards for religious education

For political reasons, the process of internationalization and globalization in general and of the political unification of Europe in particular make it highly desirable to develop a more comprehensive understanding of religious education. Standards for religious education, for example, should no longer be based on one national situation alone but should apply – speaking for the situation in Europe – at least to the different countries within the European Union, among others in order to give them more weight in the political arena. Saying this, it is important to note that such standards should not be confused with the now current standards for assessment formulated by government agencies like OfSTED in the UK but that they refer to what religious education professionals – on the basis of their academic expertise – have reason to expect to be made available for children and youth in different countries.

In a first attempt at setting forth such standards or professional criteria (cf. Schweitzer 2002 for more details), I suggested the following examples which seem especially important to me in respect to RE in schools:

- (a) Religion must and can be taught in line with the criteria of general education (*educational quality*).
- (b) Religious education is of relevance to the public and must be taught in line with this relevance (*contribution to general education*).
- (c) Religious education must include some type of interdenominational and interreligious learning, in line with the increasingly pluralist situation in many countries (*dialogical quality, contribution to peace and tolerance*).
- (d) Religious education must be based on the children's right to religion and religious education (*child-centred approach based on children's rights*, cf. Schweitzer 2000).
- (e) Religious education teachers must be professionals in the sense that they have reached a level of self-reflexivity based on academic work which allows for a critical appropriation of their religious backgrounds and biographies (*professional teaching*).

Another example for the attempt of identifying standards is called the 'Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools' (ODIHR 2007). These principles advocate a religious studies type of religious education ('teaching *about* religion') as a minimum requirement for schools.

Clearly such guidelines or standards set forth by individuals or working groups are no more than a first beginning for the process of identifying expectations towards religious education which are based on a broad professional consensus and can count on widespread international support. It is also evident,

however, that formulating shared expectations becomes more and more important.

3. Obstacles for Comparative Research

If there are good reasons for comparative research in religious education on the one hand and if, on the other hand, it has nevertheless taken a long time before this kind of research has become a serious topic, two conclusions are possible: Either the reasons stated above are not quite as good as they appear to be, or there must be specific obstacles that have prevented comparative research from flourishing. Since I am convinced that the reasons for comparative research stated above are in fact good, I want to focus on the issue of obstacles.

Three prime obstacles seem to play a crucial role:

First, there is the problem of language. Comparative research most often involves working with at least two different languages. This seems to raise special problems in the field of religious education. While the degree of internationalisation in religious education is comparatively high, the same cannot be said about religious education's ability to work in different languages. International conferences are typically held in English. Publications will only be read beyond one's own country – or will only be accepted for publication – if they are in English. This monolingualism clearly distinguishes religious education unfavourably from other fields, for example, in theology, e. g. exegesis or church history. Serious comparative research is impossible without securing the linguistic presuppositions. The fact, that, for example in Germany, there are a number of studies referring to the UK and basically none referring to Scandinavia is telling in terms of what languages researchers are familiar with. In terms of the considered importance of research topics, however, it does not make sense at all.

Second, there is the problem of how comparative research fits with the tasks of training educators and teachers. How much knowledge about international developments should be required from a highschool teacher? What is the use of becoming familiar with the pedagogies in other countries in terms of improving one's own work in a local grade school? I do not think that answers to these questions are impossible. Yet the existing religious education literature does not go very far in telling students why they should be interested in comparative research or in international discussions and developments (as an exception cf. Heimbrock 2004). At the same time, at least some teacher students have become rather mobile, in Germany, for example, because they combine two subjects in their studies – for instance, a modern language and religious education. Such students often also develop an interest in comparing religious education in the