



RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS
AND SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

Sturla Sagberg

Holistic Religious Education – is it possible?

The complex web of religion,
spirituality and morality

WAXMANN

Research on Religious and Spiritual Education

edited by

Theo van der Zee, Kirsi Tirri and Ulrich Riegel

Volume 8

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Waxmann 2015
Münster • New York

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

Research on Religious and Spiritual Education, volume 8

ISSN 2191-8821

ISBN 978-3-8309-3318-2

Ebook-ISBN 978-3-8309-8318-7

© Waxmann Verlag GmbH, 2015
Münster, Germany

www.waxmann.com
info@waxmann.com

Cover Design: Plessmann Design, Ascheberg

Typesetting: Sven Solterbeck, Münster

Print: Hubert & Co., Göttingen

Printed on age-resistant paper,
acid-free according to ISO 9706



Printed in Germany

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Preface

This book is the result of a process with a long prehistory, starting with dilemmas presented to me by students of early childhood education in the beginning of the 1990s. These dilemmas had to do with the didactical and ethical demands of talking with children about what we might call existential questions of life: Who am I? Why is something wrong and something else all right? What happens when we die? Why do some people believe in Jesus and some do not? Or, as one six-year old girl was reported to ask one student, ‘Does God have a cousin?’ The student had to consider which path to follow. Should she answer in accord with traditional, normative Christian views, as was expected at that time (1991), or should she instead follow a course of her own views, or try to explore those of the child?

During the 1990s Norwegian society became increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious, like the rest of Europe, and working in the field of religious education has come to include several disciplines and several approaches to childhood. After having written a thesis concerning ethics of religious education in 2001 with the title *Authenticity and Wonder* (Sagberg, 2001), I was drawn into international networks of religious education, children’s spirituality and the notion of child theology. Taking part in these networks has stimulated further research on how to understand children and childhood in today’s multi-faceted world of beliefs, practices, worldviews and religions.

This book draws some lines of thought from a long and ongoing process of listening to children, educators and fellow academics in the effort to create meaning and to reflect on meaning-making and religion. Religious education should be and can be a central element in meaning-making, depending on the approaches chosen for entering the world of childhood. In education, different approaches, disciplines and discourses shape our thinking, sometimes supplementing each other, sometimes competing. Education in a basic sense is, however, an effort to create a meaningful whole informed by different strands of knowledge. This book tries to weave together several threads from research on religious and spiritual education. The questions discussed are not easy, and the resulting discussion is certainly not seamless. My aim is to contribute to religious and spiritual literacy that promotes and supports holistic education as a counterforce against feelings of meaninglessness and fragmentation.

The process of weaving together the strands of meaning in these chapters has been a journey of revisiting several fora of research and corresponding publications. Many of the topics have been discussed in articles, in books or in journals, but none of these have survived the revisiting process unchanged. Each chapter may be read separately as a particular perspective on the main topic, but a number of references to other chapters indicate that they all are parts of a whole. Several methods have been utilised in the different chapters and will be identified when relevant. In terms of genre, the chapters are best considered as philosophical essays

where I try to be loyal to basic criteria of academic truthfulness without following one particular methodological path in a strict sense.

Acknowledgements

Although the beginnings of this book go some years back, it became a reality following a presentation at a network conference of the European Association of Research, Instruction and Learning (EARLI) in München, 2013. My thanks go to Waxmann Verlag and to Ecutive Editor Beate Plugge for believing in the project. I am also grateful to Theo van der Zee, Kirsi Tirri, and Ulrich Riegel, editors of the book series *Research on Religious and Spiritual Education*, for helpful suggestions and responses.

I had the privilege of being a visiting scholar at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, for some weeks during the spring of 2014, which enabled me to take many leaps forward in the process of writing. I am thankful for the hospitality and inspiring encounters with the Gustavus community. I am especially indebted to Professor Marcia Bunge for the challenging discussions, feedback and advice.

My home institution, Queen Maud University College in Trondheim, Norway, supports the production of this book and has, as always, supported my ideas even when they carry me a long way from home. I owe thanks to my wife Randi for her loving support. For this book, I also owe gratitude to my grownup children and my granddaughter Karen Kurisaki-Sagberg, who all, without being aware of it, have provided and still provide me with a mirror and a practical test for all I do and think concerning young children, teaching me about what it is to be a child when my own childhood is hidden somewhere in the mist of time, or possibly also inside me.

Trondheim, early summer 2015
Sturla Sagberg

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Introduction

Holistic religious education or bits and pieces

Some twenty years ago I interviewed kindergarten teachers about the place given to Christian traditions and stories in kindergarten practice. One of them told me that if there is a teacher who ‘feels at home’ with the Christian message, she is usually the one who is asked to ‘take that part’. The ideal is that ‘the whole thing should be authentic to the children’.¹ Then she added, ‘Still there is no wholeness ... Not in the education we give here, about Christianity, or Christian education or what I should say. It is bits and pieces’ (Sagberg, 2001, p. 99, my translation).

Her description has followed me since. Most teachers have an idea about education being holistic, coherent and authentic, also when religion is concerned. Late modern culture is, however, often perceived as being fragmented, which is a big challenge to education in general and to religious education in particular. This book is a journey into the complex landscape of religious education in a secularised and more or less pluralistic Western culture in an attempt to find viable trajectories of making meaning.

Children make meaning from the very moment they open their eyes to life, and they continue to navigate in search for and creation of meaning. Meaning in life concerns perceptions of the world, of what is right or good, of values and virtues, duties and norms, attitudes and agency, and conceptions of what it really means to be human. The search for meaning connects everyday thinking at all stages of life to major philosophical and religious concepts. Religious education has to deal with several discourses of meaning. This is reflected in the Norwegian school subject *religion, philosophy of life² and ethics* and in the corresponding subject area in kindergartens (*religion, ethics and philosophy*).³ Similar cross- or interdisciplinary forms of religious education are found in many European countries. It is also reflected in the corresponding academic discipline of religious education which is informed by many disciplines that sometimes converge and sometimes coexist in tension.

It should be observed that the very concept of religious education is understood differently in different cultural contexts. In most European countries religious education is identical with the subject of religion in public education on all levels, while in the USA it has church education or faith education as a context, since religion is not connected to a specific school subject. Furthermore, when I use the concept of ‘public education’ in this book, I mean educational institutions run ac-

1 She used the Norwegian word ‘ekte’ (like German *echt*), for which I use the equivalent ‘authentic’ (Sagberg, 1996, 2001).

2 The Norwegian word ‘*livssyn*’ (literally ‘life views’) denotes philosophies of life that may or may not be religiously grounded.

3 Pre-school education does not operate with subjects in a strict sense, but the national framework plan describes ‘subject areas’ within the contents of pedagogical planning.

ording to state laws and regulations.⁴ In many countries a great number of schools and kindergartens are owned and run by faith communities. As long as these follow the same educational policy and regulations as state institutions and are open to all, they will be included in the concept of public education. I do not discuss all the varieties of other educational institutions. The academic study of religious education includes views on school and pre-school institutions, and church.

Moreover, in countries with a culture of Eastern Orthodox Christianity there is often some tension between religious education and church education (Kozhuharov, 2001). For the lack of a universally accepted alternative, I maintain the use of ‘religious education’ as an expression of what education may be when it has religion as its content. This is in concord with the use in international networks of religious education, leaving the variety and diversity open to discussion and research.

My own position, or hermeneutical pre-understanding, has been shaped by studies in theology, ethics and education, but also by three decades of educating teachers and church educators. Encounters with teachers and children in everyday contexts have raised basic questions concerning education, meaning-making, morality and religious faith. In the study referred to above, I found these questions relating to ideals of being authentic to oneself in tension with giving children authentic encounters with religious traditions, of understanding religion in terms of normative, institutionalised religion and actual religious practice on one hand, versus religion as an element of a common culture on the other hand (Sagberg, 2001, p. 144). I have tried to illustrate these ideals as positions on a map (see figure 1). The faces represent views expressed by teachers in my study, and the names given to positions on the map reflect my interpretation of expressed attitudes. This might need some clarification.

‘The theatre’ denotes an attitude towards religion (*in casu*: Christianity) where religion and culture are one, in the sense that religion is interpreted in terms of cultural history, aesthetics and narratives that are parts of a wider cultural identity. In terms of education this means that religious stories, texts, and expressions of art are used along with other cultural expressions without connecting them to specific personal faith.

‘Work of duty’ denotes attitudes where teachers may have personal philosophies or beliefs that are perceived as being different from or opposed to the actual subject matter, but they are loyal to their task as teachers without taking their own views into account. The result is that children may encounter religious traditions but rarely with a chance to discuss their more existential significance.

‘The narthex’, the hall in front of the sanctuary in a church, denotes an attitude where teachers consider places of worship as an integrated element in public life. Taking part in religious life is not part of education as such, but they will not hide

4 I am aware of a different connotation to ‘public school’ in a British context, meaning exclusive, old-style boarding schools based on fees and different from state schools.

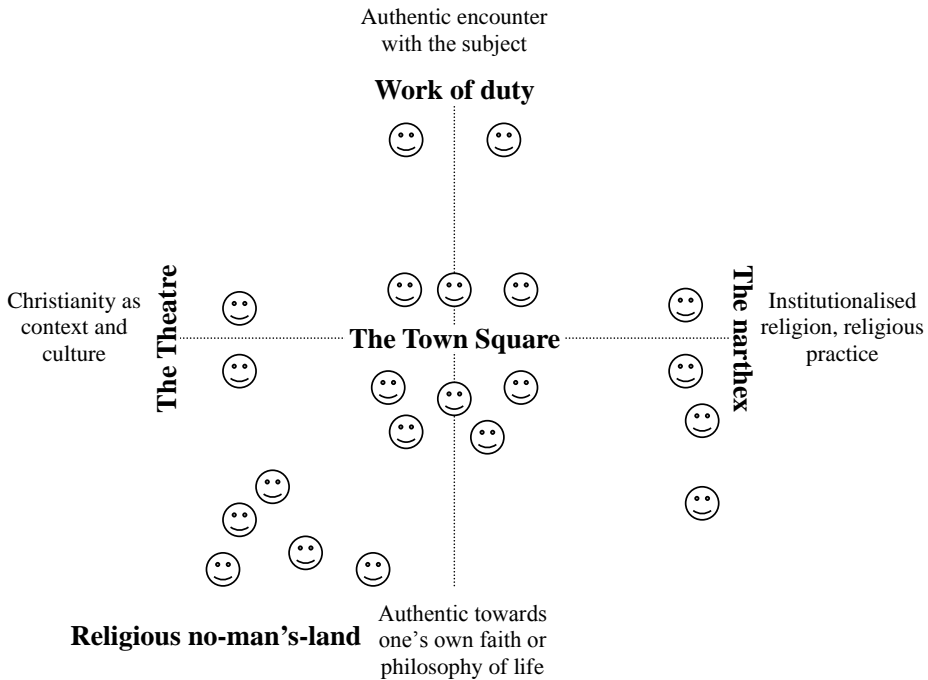


Figure 1: A map of attitudes towards religious traditions in kindergartens

their own faith, and they are willing to talk with children about religious experiences and practices.

‘Religious no-man’s land’ represents attitudes where teachers consider matters of religion as a non-subject, for various reasons. Usually this has to do with their understanding of religion only in terms of personal faith, which they regard as a matter of private concern only.

‘The town square’ is the place where most teachers in my study find themselves. It means they are aware of the presence of church or of other symbols of religion, and it is possible to talk about the meaning of religion without giving it special focus or involving oneself, be it in terms of using religious traditions as cultural resources or of visiting places of worship. Some find this position difficult because they have an ideal of a more holistic education, while some are more indifferent or move to and from different positions.

The description in figure 1 is based on a study that goes back to the 1990s, but the positions and the attempt to characterise them may still serve a hermeneutical purpose. More recent studies indicate that similar positions are found today as well, even when accounting for changes in concepts of what really is the subject matter of religion. The most significant change in religious education during the last twenty years may be that religious diversity has not only become a fact, but

also a normative element in educational policy,⁵ while in 1995 educational policy still reflected religious plurality as a challenge to what was perceived as a mainly Christian culture. At the same time, children are granted more say in things concerning themselves, and the role of the teacher is under discussion. This development makes my informant's point even more challenging: 'There is no wholeness ... it is bits and pieces'. The big question is, in what way religion can be a subject in holistic education? Is holistic religious education possible and plausible, and if it is, how do the various approaches and traditions serve to support a sense of holism both for the adult and for children?

Most chapters of this book have been developed in contact with international networks. Nonetheless, the Nordic genesis may raise some questions about the relevance for other parts of the world. A short answer would be that what happens in one part of the world today affects humanity as such. A longer answer would involve considering the particular contribution from the Nordic context. Educationists claim that there is a Nordic ideology of childhood that is closely connected to values like egalitarianism, emancipation, democracy, solidarity and concepts of a good childhood – values that are cornerstones in Nordic societies (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006), see chapter 2. These values have, likewise, affected the role of religion, most often in terms of cultural heritage that supports and holds together society, but also in the sense that children should be respected as autonomous subjects, including in terms of religion. In recent years Nordic societies underwent enormous changes in both societal and religious matters, and the discussions following these changes transcend the Nordic context without necessarily being noticed across language borders.

The meaning of holism

The concept of *holism* is used in many contexts with different ideologies, but basic to all is an attitude or a methodology that emphasises the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts. This may carry several meanings in the context of education and of religious education.

- 1) Holism may refer to a specific religion as a comprehensive view of life. I believe my informant held such an understanding when she claimed that it is impossible to talk about Christianity in terms of 'wholeness', because society has become both secularised and religiously pluralistic.

5 This is explicit in the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012, p. 8), mirroring amendments to the Norwegian *Education Act* of 1998 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2014). The *Education Act* in English can be retrieved from <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/b3b9e92cce6742c39581b661a019e504/education-act-norway-with-amendments-entred-2014-2.pdf>.

- 2) Holism may also refer to a philosophy of life that is presented as an alternative to traditional religions, claiming that there is a spirituality that connects to science and human reason in manners that make religions superfluous. In a paradoxical way ‘holists’ still establish ceremonies and rites that resemble those of religions, making it hard to see how this meaning would be much different from the first.⁶
- 3) Holism may refer to the person, meaning that religious education should aim at the whole person. Article 27 of Convention on the Rights of the Child states the ‘right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’. The instruments of human rights are developed to safeguard the right to believe and to express one’s beliefs in a safe society, or in other words, to safeguard plurality.

My use of the term takes its point of departure in the third meaning, while trying to connect to the basic meaning of holism, namely *the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts*. It is possible to view the concept of holism as a *hermeneutical concept*. It invites researchers to consider the many parts and aspects connected to religious education to see how they interact and work towards the importance of the subject as such. This applies to all levels – the academic discipline, teacher education and education on the levels of school and kindergarten. Following this line of reason, holistic religious education could be developed to aid children in their construction of meaning. In that function, it should contribute to respecting the integrity of the child as well as acknowledging a plurality of beliefs. This paradox necessitates a deeper exploration.

Put simply, I find the description in the Convention both morally and pedagogically sound as a basis for all education, despite the fact that different states interpret it differently. These differences rely on different understandings of the relationship between religion and culture, or of the meaning of spirituality. Therefore, the notion of holistic religious education requires a discussion of these issues (see chapters 5, 6 and 7). Concerning the meaning of spirituality, the issue has had but little attention in Scandinavian education. In Norway’s first reports on how the Convention is implemented (BFD, 1993, 1998), children’s spiritual development is mentioned only in a comment to Article 29, where ‘spiritual’ is used with the same meaning as ‘mental’. Article 27 is commented on only in terms of living standards without commenting on the various aspects of a child’s development. Later reports follow the same trend. Article 14 is mentioned in terms of the right to withdraw pupils from elements in religious education, with little emphasis on what has been done to help parents in the task of guiding children.

I would claim that the right to ‘a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’ (§ 27 in the Convention) encompasses more than what has come to the attention of the policy makers. Stud-

6 <http://www.holisme.no/nb/node/61>.

ies from England indicate a similar lack of perspective in government policy. The Children Act 2004 and the programme called Every Child Matters may illustrate this lack. Children's well-being is described in five domains but without mentioning the right to spiritual development. That is to say, values mentioned in the policy documents may be equated with children's spirituality (Watson, 2006), but as Watson points out, the richness of what can be meant by spirituality in terms of transcendent beliefs and values of existential meaning is marginalised. This should be of concern not only to religious bodies but to education in general.

The British educationalist Jack Priestly (2005) emphasises the latter concern. He points to the development of the Education Act in England (1918, 1944 and 1988) that has kept a notion of the spiritual linked to civilisation and character. This is parallel to the continuity between the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child and § 27 in the 1989 Convention. Priestly argues for a holistic approach to children's spirituality, like it was intended in the documents mentioned. This will, however, require varied descriptions and narratives, not definitions that separate spirituality from other aspects on the life of children.

Public responses to children's rights demand close attention from faith communities and church work with children. For religious reasons some states reject children's rights. Other states use children's rights to curb the power and authority of religious bodies over children. In a Christian context some issues call for specific attention. Some concern the way churches deal with the judicial aspects of children's rights, most clearly stated in the Convention, while others concern the deeper structure of moral obligation that is explicitly stated in the declarations. Despite these deficiencies in the interpretation and practice of the Convention, there is hardly any other document that has a similar power to challenge education towards holistic thinking. It requires an approach that opposes reductionist teaching about religion as well as exclusivist or inclusivist theology of religions. Religions must be studied in their own right, while also recognising the imperfection of all religious systems and institutions. This means that a holistic approach to religious education first of all must imply a humble attitude combined with a search for truth and meaning. It also means that it is necessary to view religious education in relation to what is said about the child in general (physically, morally, spiritually, and mentally) and about the meaning of religion in society and culture.

My discussion takes place in a cultural context where Christianity is a major force, and my approach is that of a Christian theologian. A holistic approach from that position means exploring how children's meaning-making and religious education relates to Christian traditions as well as to other traditions without reducing either of them. My personal stance is to view all religions, including my own, as cultural expressions that should be open to continuous scrutiny concerning their cognitive, moral and spiritual coherence, their significance for humanity (following the lead from the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and their openness towards existential faith and commitment. This will in most cases also involve faith