

International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education

- A Manifesto for Discussion -

In October 2018, a group of scholars in the field of religious education in different European countries met at Berlin for a consultation organized by the Comenius-Institute (Peter Schreiner) and the chair of religious education at the University of Tübingen (Friedrich Schweitzer). After intensive discussions concerning the challenge of international knowledge transfer in religious education, this group decided that it is time to start a broader discussion on this topic in different countries and, if possible, also in leading periodicals of the field. Moreover, it was considered a good starting point for this kind of discussion to draft a brief manifesto which could initiate and stimulate further discussions.

The Challenge

International knowledge transfer is an ideal which has come to play an increasingly important role in academia as well as in politics.

This is true for all fields of knowledge, be it in the natural sciences or the humanities. Scientists are encouraged to make their findings accessible at an international level. The European Union actively supports international knowledge transfer, for example, through programs like Erasmus+ and so-called mobility agreements between universities in different countries.

In the natural sciences, international exchange has always played a key role. It is hard to imagine that new groundbreaking findings in biology, chemistry or physics should not find the interest of colleagues in other countries. The same certainly applies to mathematics. Another example is the field of medical research. Other fields, however, seem to show less international openness, possibly because they are strongly rooted in different cultural or national contexts and therefore see less reason for appropriating findings from other countries, although more and more, internationalization has become important in all fields of research.

The observation of increasing internationalization also applies to the academic discipline of religious education.

Since the 1970s, international conferences and symposiums have become more and more frequent. The development of international structures like international associations, research groups, seminars, and other initiatives concerning international exchange and cooperation in the field of academic

religious education are an institutional outcome of this development. There also is a growing interest in international-comparative research in religious education which underscores the quest for internationalization and transnational cooperation. Today, international exchange takes place at many different levels in religious education. In this sense, international knowledge transfer has become a taken for granted part of the work of religious education. The importance of both international and transnational perspectives for religious education has been successfully demonstrated. Yet the question for which public or publics these international meetings are of importance has rarely been addressed.

Internationalization in religious education also implies academic exchange between different denominational traditions in religious education. Closer collaboration between researchers from different Christian traditions both at the national and international level is a promising perspective which should also be pursued more intentionally in the future.

Yet there also is the observation that religious education has not reached the point at which one could speak of an integrated field of research.

It seems to be the rare exception that international groups of researchers would be working on certain problems and even more, that the solutions for certain problems or at least the analysis of such problems offered by individuals or groups in the field would become part of the common cumulative knowledge upon which religious education should be built in the future. Can religious education be viewed, at least in part, as a research discipline producing results which are of international importance for both, theoretical and empirical insights and also in terms of their applicability in practices of religious education?

At present, one may observe contradictory developments in this respect.

In many countries, there is a strong tendency towards developing religious education as a field of research of its own right. Religious education strives to be more than the application of research done in other fields. Moreover, there have been discussions not only on research results but also on methodologies as well as on criteria for research (although this is probably more true for European countries than, for example, the United States of America). At the same time, it certainly is not the rule that research results on religious education are considered of interest beyond the given country.

Much religious education literature is not even read outside the national contexts. Many contributions are published only in the vernacular and there is no encouragement in religious education to learn or to use foreign languages, with the exception of English. Yet only a very small portion of knowledge pertaining to religious education has been published in English. This is true for many countries, among them, for example, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Although there have been attempts to publish more in English, for example, in the Scandinavian countries, the general presumption in religious education still seems to be that research results from one country are not of interest or importance in other countries or that they are not transferable due to their context-dependency. For the advancement of religious education as an academic discipline but, ultimately, also for the practice of religious education, this is a serious obstacle which should no longer go unaddressed.

What Can Be Done

First of all, there is a need for clarification and agreement.

Academic international and transnational relationships most naturally include a transfer of knowledge which raises important questions.

- ❖ What kinds of knowledge are transferred?
- ❖ What makes such transfer possible?
- ❖ What exactly does transfer mean in this case?
- ❖ Is there knowledge in religious education that can be applied internationally and by whom?

Some of these questions refer to the philosophy of science underpinning research in religious education.

- ❖ Should the validity of knowledge in religious education be considered general / universal or should it be seen as particular and regionally bound?
- ❖ Is this knowledge valid only in one country or is it valid internationally, independently of its national context of discovery?
- ❖ And what type of knowledge is transferred with what normative status?
- ❖ Who might possibly benefit from it?

In order to reach clarification and agreement concerning such questions additional international work will be necessary.

Clearly new efforts are needed which go beyond the coincidental forms of exchange which often are characteristic of international conferences and seminars. Larger conferences are indispensable for becoming aware of research around the world; thematically focused seminars remain helpful for concentrated exchange on select topics sometimes chosen by international partners also working together with societal interest groups. Yet neither form of international exchange seems to have done enough for creating an integrated field of research on religious education which would imply, for example, that there are cumulative effects concerning research-based knowledge in religious education which can be applied in the field of religious education.

The general impression appears to be that there are an increasing number of national and international networks of academics, practitioners and politicians which are interested in research on religious education which can be seen as a hopeful sign in terms of internationalizing the field and working towards international knowledge transfer with an eye on theory-building, empirical insights and practical usability. At the same time, however, these initiatives appear to be often unrelated to each other, even if they are addressing similar questions, and their results are not presented in a way which would allow for connecting them to the insights gained by other researchers.

Exemplary Suggestions

Describing the challenges entailed by international knowledge transfer in religious education and formulating general perspectives for the future is one thing. Yet more than this will be needed if international knowledge transfer in religious education is to become more successful in the future in respect to several different publics. For this reason, a number of exemplary possibilities are mentioned here.

- *Mapping the research scene:* While accounts of the practice of religious education in different countries have become available (mostly concerning Religious Education as a school subject but, in some instances, also concerning non-formal religious education), the same is not true for religious education as a field of research in different countries. Mapping the religious education research scene in Europe (and beyond) could therefore be a first important task in advancing international knowledge transfer in this field.

- *Initiatives for methodological considerations:* So far, comparative studies often do not focus on the diverse relationships and transfer processes between different countries. Moreover, the production, exchange, dissemination and reception of knowledge should be understood as historical processes. This means that religious education should develop a suitable methodological toolkit for analyzing international relationships and transfer processes. For these reasons, initiatives are needed to make the case for expanding the methodologies of empirical and comparative research by including historical and transfer-oriented approaches. Finally, research on international and transnational knowledge transfer in religious education also overlaps with the epistemological interests of reception and impact research as well as the history of knowledge and translation studies.

- *Initiatives for sharing knowledge:* Since some concepts of ‘transfer’ seem to imply uni-lateral relationships or even hierarchies between those who are in possession of a certain knowledge and those who should receive it, concepts like ‘sharing’ or ‘exchanging’ knowledge appear to be more applicable to the cooperative spirit characteristic of the field of religious education. What is decisive, however, is that initiatives are needed which follow the format of truly sharing knowledge, i.e. of investigating how different insights concerning a certain task or problem, for example, of successful teaching fit together.

- *Investigating successful and non-successful forms of international knowledge exchange in religious education:* Existing research, among others on transnationalization, shows that knowledge has indeed been transferred or shared in religious education on many occasions, although not in any systematic manner. Examples from past and present therefore entail the opportunity of investigating the question of how the international exchange of knowledge has proceeded in these cases and what made them successful or non-successful. Such investigations should also include a clear analysis of the criteria which allow for distinguishing between different degrees of success in this case.

An Invitation

The authors would like to invite colleagues from the field of religious education (and beyond) to contribute to a new debate on international knowledge transfer in religious education. They would appreciate theoretical contributions as well as additional practical suggestions and initiatives.

This manifesto has been sent to a number of leading journals in the field in order to start this discussion. Moreover, the authors themselves will continue to work on the issues raised by this manifesto in further international meetings.

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