Research on Religious and Spiritual Education
Guest Editorial

Theo van der Zee & Kirsi Tirri

a) Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands
t.v.d.zee@iko.ru.nl

b) University of Helsinki, Finland
kirsi.tirri@helsinki.fi

Religious and spiritual education is an interdisciplinary field of research into learning, development, and socialisation in various contexts concerned with religion and spirituality. Although religion is involved in multicultural encounters between people in local and global contexts, the nature and role of religious education in the European school system has been questioned. The questions often come down to conceptual ambiguity and lack of research-based knowledge (Jackson, 2004). On the other hand, spirituality and holistic education appear to attract attention in current educational research and literature (Bradford, 1995; Miller, Karlsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005).

Religion and spirituality are closely related and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. The nature and relationship of religious and spiritual education have been much debated in international educational journals (Blake, 1996; Lewis, 2000). According to Carr (1995), spirituality can be seen as an aspect or dimension of religious education. The assumption here is, however, that spirituality would be accessible only to those who belong to a religious tradition. Furthermore, the school curriculum contains many other subjects besides religious education that have considerable potential for the development of spirituality: art, history, literature, the study of nature and mathematics. Spirituality can be defined in terms of relational consciousness or connections. This consciousness can be classified in terms of four dimensions — between the self and God, the self and other people, the self and the world, and finally one’s consciousness of a relationship with oneself. Reich, Oser, and Scarlett (1999) understand spirituality as a sharing of joy and sorrow and the deep connections made between human beings, between them and nature, and between them and a ‘higher being’. They also distinguish
between religion, religious spirituality and natural spirituality. Emmons and Crumpler (1999) see spirituality at work when individuals take something to be transcendent or of great value. This may be a relationship with God, the transcendent love between family members or between friends, or the transcendent principle of equality of all people. From such a perspective, an atheist can lead a life full of natural spirituality (Reich, 2000).

As far as we are concerned, both religion and spirituality refer to traditions in which people search for meaning in relation to (the ultimate) reality — or, to put it differently, in which people orient themselves to aspire to fullness of life (Taylor, 2007). It is, however, reasonable to distinguish between religion and spirituality. A promising way of doing this is to perceive spirituality as an ability to transcend oneself in favour of something (someone) greater than the self (cf. Emmons, 2000). From this perspective, the striving for a fulfilled life is defined in terms of relationship or connectedness. Spiritual traditions show how people understand and perceive these relationships. Religion, on the other hand, perceives the striving for fullness of life in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent. Religious traditions show how people understand and perceive the immanent and transcendent in their striving for a fulfilled life.

For a few decades now there have been achievements in empirical studies of religious and spiritual education (Francis, Kay & Campbell, 1996). As an empirical research discipline, however, religious and spiritual education is a relatively recent enterprise and theory formation is still in its infancy. The need to establish religious and spiritual education as a serious research discipline is still crucially important (Schweitzer, 2006). The research encompasses theoretical frameworks including psychology, pedagogy and philosophy. From the latter disciplines, religious and spiritual education derives frameworks regarding such topics as learning, socialisation, identity formation or motivation. However, religious and spiritual education has its own orientation: it is done to contribute to the formation of theory on religious identity transformation as well as to enhance educational practices concerned with religion and spirituality (cf. van der Ven, 1993).

In this special issue of the Journal of Empirical Theology five contributors, who presented earlier versions of their papers at the 2008 EARLI Special Interest Group Religious and Spiritual Education Conference in Canterbury (UK) (www.earli.org), introduce their research on religious and spiritual education. By bringing these researchers together in this special issue we aim, firstly, to introduce recent research done by three research groups in Europe: Nijmegen, Würzburg and Helsinki. Moreover, empirical data are not limited to one particular context but derive from various cultural and religious contexts, such as
Catholic schools in the Netherlands and Germany and Adventist communities in Finland.

Our aims reach further than simply an introduction to recent research — that is, showing how quantitative and qualitative research can go together, which methods of statistical analysis are used to answer more complex research questions and how researchers balance explanation and interpretation. The key to interpreting the findings is not only the theoretical frameworks that are used but also the methodology by which the data were obtained and analysed. In this issue, two researchers use quantitative as well as qualitative methods to collect data (Kuusisto; Kuhn). From their contributions we gather how research issues can be tackled by means of both methods, with ‘non-overlapping weaknesses in addition to their complementary strengths’ (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 17). The use of analytical methods also catches the eye. The use of statistical analysis as structural equation modelling (van der Zee & de Jong) and cluster analyses (Hirsto & Tirri) allows researchers to test hypotheses regarding relations in mutual coherence and on a meta-level, respectively, to bring to the fore new and interesting findings.

Another issue is the balance between explanation and interpretation. As can be gathered from the various contributions in this issue, researchers have their own ways of dealing with this balance. Some, more closely associated with the social sciences, seem to lean more on explanation, while others who are closer to the hermeneutical tradition in theology seem to attach greater importance to interpretation. How this balance should be perceived and practised is still a matter of discussion (Lawson & McCauley, 2006).

Overview of the Articles in this Special Issue

In their contribution, based on a research survey of 1 179 participants, van der Zee and de Jong aim to find out whether teachers in Catholic schools in the Netherlands are a source of inspiration. Inspiration is a core concept of their contribution and is introduced elaborately from the perspective of theology, religious studies and philosophy. An interesting question is: which qualities are attributed to inspiring teachers and which qualities to students inspired by such teachers? Based on theoretical considerations regarding the effect of inspiration, it is even more interesting to find out whether the qualities of teachers can help to explain why students develop certain qualities. Analyses by means of a structural equation model provide evidence that teachers’ qualities can, to a reasonable extent, predict the development of qualities in students. Findings are interpreted from the perspective of the fundamental
question in religiously affiliated schools — forming learners in the mould of a religious tradition while still respecting their freedom.

Kuhn presents findings of her intervention study in Catholic religious education at state-run secondary schools in Germany. The goal of her study is to discover whether students who are asked to adopt the perspective of another person’s life and conflict are influenced both by their own attitudes and by their perception of that person. Findings appear to confirm her hypotheses and are interpreted in the theoretical perspective of role taking. Remarkably, if students recognise the person behind the biographical sketch as religious (for example, because of ordination), they use religious expressions in dealing with the dilemma with which that person is confronted; if not, they do not use such expressions. The implications for religious education are also discussed.

Kuusisto studies the religious socialisation of young people who grow up within a relatively coherent religious minority of Adventist communities in the increasingly pluralistic societal context of Finland. The aim of her study is to find out which identity negotiations confront them in such different social contexts as family, community and school. For example, a conflict of values and expectations between home and the peer group at school might be expected. How do youngsters deal with these conflicts in the perspective of their religious identity construction? Findings reveal that this construction entails an ongoing process of positioning and repositioning one’s memberships and negotiating values in a diversity of social contexts. Implications for religious education practices in the contexts of school, family and community are discussed.

Tirri, Nokelainen and Mahkonen explore the moral and religious reasoning of mathematically gifted adolescents (N = 20) who attend a special boarding school for gifted students in Finland. They aim to find out how intelligence and moral and religious reasoning are related, using three well-documented measures to gather their data: the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale III (WAIS-III); the Defining Issues Test (DIT); and the Religious Judgment Test (RJT). Findings reveal some remarkable relationships — for instance, that the most intelligent young adults were more opposed to the highest forms of religious reasoning (orientation on mediated autonomy and salvation plan; religious intersubjectivity and autonomy) than their less intelligent peers. The authors cautiously discuss the provisional findings in the perspective of the mutual relationship between intelligence and moral and religious reasoning.

Finally, Hiristo and Tirri study the relationship between motivational approaches to the study of theology and spiritual sensitivity. They hypothesise relations between various career motives and categories of spiritual sensitivity. To deepen their understanding of these relations, they go beyond testing
hypotheses, further exploring the relationships by trying to find groups of students with different kinds of motives and spiritual sensitivity structures. Cluster analysis produced three student groups that differed in terms of motivational approach, spiritual sensitivity and uncertainty of career choice: a scientific, a community and a spirituality approach. Findings are discussed in the perspective of theology formation.

Suggestions for Future Research

The articles in this special issue contain findings of recent research on religious and spiritual education and point to the considerable volume of work that remains to be done. There are still so many unknown territories to explore! We present some suggestions for future research.

First, the context. Research is done in various contexts, religious as well as cultural. The limitations of the various studies in this issue relate to specific contexts. To obtain more robust findings and to make inferences with a view to effective religious education practices, further research should deal with larger and more representative samples in various religious and cultural contexts. For example: do parents, teachers and students in other countries attribute the same qualities to inspiring teachers, and to students who are inspired by these teachers, as they do in the Netherlands (van der Zee & de Jong)? This research should include questions regarding the own conceptuality in the various contexts (Mercer & Roebben, 2007).

Second, the measures. Often, but not always, researchers on religious and spiritual education devise their own measures — as the contributors to this issue have done (apart from Tirri, Nokelainen & Mahkonen, and Hirsto & Tirri). Well-documented measures are relatively rare in this field of research. It is advisable to work on more documentation regarding various measures — for example, by testing them in various contexts.

Third, the triangulation. Data can be obtained by various measures, as the studies by Kuhn and by Kuusisto show. By triangulating the results from analyses of qualitative and quantitative data, we are able to get a more robust and balanced view on specific topics in religious and spiritual education. Triangulation procedures are requested to integrate results derived from different data.

Fourth, the balance between explanation and interpretation. It would be very interesting to reflect on metatheoretical theses of researchers in religious and spiritual education regarding explanation and interpretation. How does their position contribute to theory formation in religious and spiritual
education? Could an interactive position, as proposed by Lawson and McCauley (2006), enhance theory formation in this discipline? A metatheoretical analysis of research in religious and spiritual education on this issue has yet to be undertaken.

These suggestions are based on the contributions in this special issue and sound very ambitious (as indeed they are). However, this issue will have achieved something if it can stimulate and encourage discussions among researchers and, perhaps, closer cooperation in order to enhance theory formation and educational practices in religion and spirituality.

References


