Religious plurality is a fact of life in Western societies. For decades now, students professing various religions have entered schools and in their wake religions other than that to which the school is affiliated have entered the RE (religious education) classroom. Students are encouraged to learn and to develop their religious identity by communicating with others about the practices of various religious traditions. It may well be that the acceptance of religious plurality (i.e. the presence of others who are religiously different) in RE is enhanced by the idea that we get to know and develop ourselves by way of detour and return (Ricoeur). But the actualisation of religious identity formation by participation in, for example, interreligious dialogue is by no means easy. Naïve and romantic ideas about a formation project that results in classroom dialogue inhibit a constructive and fruitful approach.

Various studies have appeared on the topic of religious identity formation in a pluralistic context, probing into such issues as diversity and similarity, otherness and sameness. Recently a volume entitled Religious education as encounter was added to the long list of interesting studies on religious education and plurality. This volume contains ten important contributions by European scholars of religious education. Inspired by the ideas of John M. Hull, they explore whether the concept of encounter can enhance the theory and practice of religious education when it comes to dealing with plurality. A number of these contributions are certainly thought-provoking.

First, John Hull has some intriguing reflections on the subject of imagining a world other than the one we normally live in, with special reference to sighted people and blind people. His association of the physical world of human bodies (sight/blindness) with the world of religion is an interesting one: “the sense of strangeness in the presence of the religious other is the tribute we pay and the defence we erect with respect to our own taken for granted world” (p. 31). Second, Friedrich Schweitzer clarifies the issue by linking the concept of encounter to that of comparison. These concepts “should not be kept separate but should be connected so that they can strengthen each other”. (p. 38). Schweitzer explores the implications of this connection for the practice of religious education as well as for related research. Third, Hans-Günter Heimbrock explores the phenomenon of encounter by linking it to formation. Encounter, he says, “points at the heart of the pedagogical process, because encounter is necessary for the formation of the self” (p. 89). From a phenomenological perspective, Heimbrock pleads for a multi-dimensional approach to encounter: not only the social but also the religious dimension is in question. Encounter is about becoming more open to a reality which “imposes itself upon us” (Tillich), and therefore RE “asks for learning arrangements that give pupils a glimpse of what it could mean to get in touch with reality” (p. 94). Finally, in a contribution based on their empirical research, Bakker and Ter Avest focus on critical incidents, related to the construction of a school’s identity, in the biographies of teachers. In most teachers’ narratives, encounter is central and relation is a keyword: teachers write about their relationships with pupils in order to explain what they are doing professionally and how they understand themselves as professionals. To understand what encounter means in this context, the concepts of mutuality and otherness could prove helpful.

From a conceptual point of view, the volume encourages a better understanding of plurality in the context of RE. Empirical research on encounter in the RE classroom
could provide insight into how students (and teachers) communicate with each other in respect of mutuality, otherness and sameness.

One thing still puzzles me about various studies on religious identity formation in a pluralistic context, including the interesting theoretical and empirical contributions in the volume under discussion. The problem of RE and plurality is usually dealt with in terms of sameness and otherness, or the other and me. This leads one to suppose that the problem concerning the present-day context is the problem of how individuals should communicate with each other as individuals. My question: is this all? It might well be that, in the present-day context of plurality and individualism, the issue is not only how individuals should relate to each other by communicating but also how they should relate to larger entities such as the school, community or society. Are students only individuals who may or may not relate to each other, or could they also be part of larger contexts? I think I have good reason to believe that RE should address both aspects. In terms of the volume we have been discussing: might RE deal with encounter not only as a central concept of relating to the ‘other’ but also in terms of the relation of the individual (student) to the collective (class, school, community)? This calls for further reflection and research.

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