Religion in Indian schools

Exploring national systems of religious education through 'mirroring'

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Abstract

India is a secular state. For this reason, it has been claimed that there is no room for religion in its schools — in other words, no religious education [RE] — despite India being an extremely multicultural society. This compilation thesis begins by examining the aforementioned claim. On the level of educational policy, there might indeed be little religious content. However, the present study shows that the closer to school practice one looks, the more content about religion or even content in religion can be found. Empirical material backing up this claim includes text analysis of policies, curricula, and textbooks as well as ethnological material consisting of interviews and observations from schools in India.

An inherent possibility of research in the humanities is that it might qualitatively change the researcher's perspective. In this case, an unexpected result of researching 'RE' in India was *new insights into the researcher's context of origin*. The manner of attaining new perspectives on the context of origin in a contrastive analysis of two very different contexts is developed into a methodology of *mirroring*. The purpose of mirroring is not to compare as such, but rather to explore the researcher's own context through reflexive introspection in the light of a contrastive. Characteristic traits of Swedish RE are explored using the methodology, and in the mirror, it appears that 'religion' in Sweden is understood through a Lutheran framework, which also affects what 'secular' means in the context. Vice versa, education about religion in India is coloured by its history and demography. 'Religion' and 'secular' are not in fact universal terms but are understood differently in different contexts. This is something often overlooked in comparative work on religious education.

Although the thesis does not offer suggestions on how religious education ought to be organised in any given place, it does discuss possible advantages and disadvantages of the way religion is handled in schools in Sweden and India, respectively.

Keywords: *subject-specific education, religion, religious education, comparative education, Sweden, India, mirroring.*

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